COMMONWEAL

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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CORRESPONDENCE

It's unanimous

Minneapolis, Minn.

To the Editors: Liz Leibold McCloskey has added her voice ["Orphaned at Birth: Women in the Church," January 27] to those of the fanatics who want to see women priests, and of course she has produced not one shred of evidence for her view. John Paul II is not alone in saying that women cannot be ordained. The church's teaching on this point is found in Scripture, tradition, canon law, the unanimous consensus of the fathers and doctors of the church, and all reliable theology manuals. The theological note attached to the doctrine is *de fide catholica*. It is therefore certain, connected with revelation, infallibly proposed for belief, and irreversible. HILARY FREEMAN, O.P.

Not quite

Philadelphia, Pa.

To the Editors: Re: Paul Baumann's "Where Symbols Really Matter" [January 27]: Few people seem to understand the power of symbols. They can't really be explained. In fact, if you can explain it, you are not dealing with a true symbol.

A large part of the hostility generated by the idea of women in the priesthood is surely caused by the "outrageous" symbol of a woman in priestly vestments standing at an altar. As an Episcopalian priest, I am currently trying to get over the shock I always experience at the sight of a woman, wearing earrings and stiletto heels, clothed in a cope and miter. But I know why I am shocked. It has nothing to do with theology or with biblical tradition. I am in the grip of a powerful symbol. And I also know from fairly recent experience that knowledge will free me, in time, from the shock.

(REV.) MICHAEL BECKER

One more threshold

Greenville, S. C.

To the Editors: Peter Steinfels's review [January 13] of Pope John Paul II's *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* was extremely provocative. On the pope's views of ecumenism, Steinfels says, "It is legitimate to ask how these views, expressed with passion, accord with the policies of John Paul's papacy. Historians may someday explore the oddity that a pope of romantic, heroic, Christocentric outlook should preside over the triumph of authoritarian, bureaucratic, and centralizing forces in the church."

As an ordained Baptist minister who is retired after teaching church history and biblical studies on the seminary and university level for forty years, I rejoiced greatly in the work of John XXIII and Paul VI—so much so that I entered the Roman Catholic church with great expectations. In many ways it was home to me. I explored anew Roman Catholicism on many levels, including the "scavi" beneath Saint Peter's and attending Masses at which John Paul presided in the great basilica.

I admire the pope's personal piety and his actions of formally forgiving Jews regarding any part their forebears had in Christ's death, that he restored the good name of Galileo, and that he tenderly forgave the man who tried to kill him. I am impressed as well with the thousands of miles the pope has traveled to greet and bless multitudes throughout his pontificate. But, because John Paul became overly authoritarian and reactionary *vis-à-vis* Vatican II, I am now a Baptist-Catholic-Methodist.

To purge Roman Catholicism of its darkest chapter, John Paul needs to cross one more threshold. Because the Roman church claims unbroken succession through history, sincerity and integrity should move the pope to make a very short but symbolic journey. It would be to Constance, where in 1415-16 the church allowed and encouraged the burning at the stake of John Hus and Jerome of Prague. Today on that site, John Paul will find a large boulder. In his frail health, he will not even need to stoop and kiss the ground. He can silently meditate in repentance and kiss the boulder while standing erect. But he should say to the world that he means by this act to say, "We are sorry and ask forgiveness for the Roman Catholic church for all the horrible acts committed by the church in the medieval Inquisition."

That simple gesture would convey more about Christian unity and healing than a million miles the pope might travel in an airplane. JOE M. KING

The writer is emeritus professor of religion at Furman University.

From the editors: Without addressing the other points of Dr. King's letter, we note, first, that John Paul II has expressed the need to "correct the record" with respect to John Hus, as well as deploring other specific unjust actions by church leaders and members (*see*: "The Perils of Penance," October 21, 1994). Second, in discussing Catholic-Jewish relations, the current pope has closely followed (and strongly promoted) the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate*, which specifically repudiates the notion that all the Jews of Christ's time were responsible for his

(Continued on page 58)

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COMMONWEAL

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Good news

Twice as heavy, twice as many pages, twice as good for you: Coverage of three *Commonweal* forums organized to examine the contentious relations between religion and the media begins on page 13. The editors started this project with the observation that the news treatment of religion was often incomplete or inadequate, and sometimes incompetent or biased. Why?

As we began planning these forums in 1993, two examples loomed large: the coverage of the Branch Davidians and of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in Chicago. In Waco, the contempt conveyed by AFT federal agents was accepted uncritically by too many reporters, who first wrote about David Koresh as a charlatan if not a criminal. Too few media outlets probed the Branch Davidians' apocalyptic beliefs or reported their part in the stand-off and final inferno. In the second case, unsubstantiated charges of sexual abuse brought against Chicago's archbishop seemed to be unfairly seized upon and sensationalized. Subsequent investigation showed that CNN, which first reported the charges, ensured that they would surface just before a CNN special on clergy sexual abuse and the opening of the 1993 Catholic bishops' meeting.

Bias, ignorance, stereotypical thinking, snap judgments, and outright dishonesty—both stories were examples of how religion thinks the media get it wrong. Where were the objectivity and fairness of professional journalism? Both stories showed the herd mentality that can take over when reporters fail to—well, be reporters. That is not the whole story, of course: these two examples along with others—egregious and edifying, sobering and amusing—weave their way through the speeches and conversations of the three *Commonweal* forums. E.J. Dionne, Jr., recounting his excellent adventure covering a papal trip to Africa, shows how the attitude governing word choices can convey the news impartially. Journalists from the religious and secular media tell many such stories, offering analyses and observations that verify problems but also point to remedies.

A confluence of structural and cultural forces has sharpened the contrasts between two views of the world, one grounded in religious tradition and the authority of Scripture, the other in the Enlightenment tradition of rationalism and skepticism. What is news? Terry Eastland's telling example illustrates the epistemological divide: we moderns get the news from our morning papers, the Israelites in the desert got theirs from the manna sent by God. Don Wycliff's counsel to journalists, "respect for one's [own] ignorance," about religion, points to the existence of personal bias. There is also a striking generational shift, as John Leo notes. Journalists—once local people knowledgeable about the communities they covered—are increasingly drawn from Ivy-league colleges and specialized professional programs. Leo argues that, as a result, "you get an elite view....Religion is okay for the masses, but it's something you [the

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journalists] leave behind." Those impressions are echoed in William Baker's experience in struggling to bring ideas—philosophical, religious, ethical—to commercial and public television.

The remedies? They lie in several directions, including appeals to fairness and objectivity, acknowledgment that religious belief and religions are a major news story, and recognition that better coverage may mean greater specialization. Assign reporters to the religion beat who know the territory as well as other reporters know the sports or political beat. Helen Alvare's plea for greater sophistication in those who covered religion was further discussed by John Dart and smartly seconded by Mary Alice Williams: the cause of most media offenses is not malice or venality but "stupidity."

The structure of news gathering, time constraints, and the conflict model of "news" have to take into account the more ambiguous, often less dramatic, slower moving, multilayered nature of religious news. These were among the points raised by Peter Steinfels and E.J. Dionne, both of whom have covered religion and both of whom think the gap between the two world views can be bridged—in part, because they have done so. Their keynote addresses (beginning on pages 14 and 26) lay out a full agenda of problems and remedies.

But remedies are a two-way street. Cokie Roberts's observation that clerics can be their own worst enemies when it comes to the media is right. As director of the U.S.C.C.'s media office, Francis Maniscalco may not entirely agree with that assessment, but in a "Postscript" following the forums (page 49), he criticizes the media but also talks about the failings of religious leaders and institutions. "Religious people...display their own kind of ignorance toward the world of the media and their own form of arrogance....This is too bad, because the two worlds have much in common. The media exist to communicate, to inform, even to shape public opinion, and the church is also about those things."

The forums covered a lot of ground. Among the outcomes: the sources of the conflicts between religion and the media are not so simple nor the impasse to better coverage unyielding. If the quality of media coverage needs improvement, so does the quality of media criticism. Grumbling about the media is a convenient way for religious leaders, as well as political leaders, to excuse their own failures. Scattershot criticism, factually shaky or uninformed about the difficulties of newsgathering, operates like the careless use of antibiotics: it creates antibodies rendering the media resistant to well-founded criticism when it is offered. Indeed, too much media criticism reveals no less bias than the coverage it targets. What passes for media criticism from religious sources is often ideological or theological warfare carried on by other means, ultimately not aimed at the media so much as at rival viewpoints within the religious group itself. But those concerned about constructively coping with the problem of the media's power in our culture and the media's inevitable role in conveying both information and attitudes about religion will find a wealth of practical information and down-to-earth insight in the *Commonweal* forums. They are not the last word, but they are a good word.

ET CETERA

BEFORE THE MILLENNIUM Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, "As the Third Millennium Draws Near," issued last November, called on the church to repent for serious historic offenses. In reading the pope's words, no greater moral failure sprang to mind than the church's failure to respond to the Nazi Holocaust.

Last month, the Catholic bishops of Germany marked the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp with an historic statement acknowledging Catholic guilt. "During the period of the Third Reich," the bishops wrote, "Christians did not carry out the required resistance to racist anti-Semitism." Furthermore, the bishops stated, the church now bears a special responsibility to speak out against anti-Semitism.

According to the pope, "Acknowledging the weakness of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us strengthen our faith, alerts us to face today's temptations, and challenges and prepares us to meet them." Yesterday: Germany. Today: Rwanda. Tomorrow?

RESEARCH NEWS RU-486, the European abortion pill, is being given clinical trials in the United States. Surveying reactions among participants, the *New York Times* (January 30, 1995), reported the response of a twenty-one-year-old student after using RU-486, "I've never had a surgical abortion..., but this seems more natural, more like how your body would have a natural miscarriage." An older West Coast woman observed, "I've had two surgical abortions, and this is a much better, less invasive, more natural method." Mother Nature goes mod.

REPORT ON BRAZIL

BUMBLEBEE OF THE SOUTH

WOBBLING TOWARD DEMOCRACY

Brazil is "the land of the future," a wag said long ago, "and it always will be." Now, once again, the Latin American country whose territory is larger than that of the contiguous United States, with a population larger than that of Russia, is poised to become a major power. With the inauguration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso as president last month, Brazil at last seems close to reaching full-scale industrialization and a seat among the world's players.

The 1980s were the lost decade for economic growth in Latin America. For Brazil the lean years extended into the nineties, even as the economies of Argentina, Chile, and Mexico picked up speed. By 1993, however, a turn-around was evident, and

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the Brazilian momentum has been sustained.

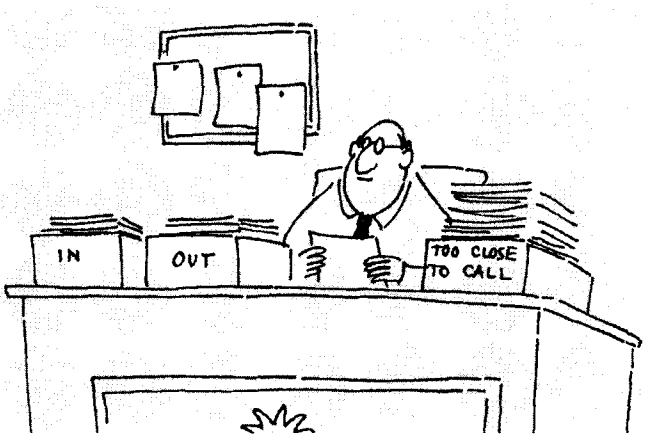
The good news comes none too soon for a country that has been wobbling toward democracy since 1985, when the military, which held power for nearly twenty years, stepped down. Efforts at democratization, it was feared, could not withstand economic stagnation. But the military has shown no inclination to get back into politics. A return to dictatorship appears to have been rendered obsolete by a process of learning on both sides. At a recent academic meeting in São Paulo it was noted, half playfully, that if the armed forces were to contemplate such a move today they would first commission a public opinion survey.

The real danger in Brazil is not a reversion to authoritarianism but the emergence of Darwinian democracy. The distribution of wealth and income is more concentrated today than in recent memory. Classified ads for condos in Miami are a regular feature of newspapers in Rio and São Paulo. Security is fortress-like in the homes of the wealthy, with top-of-the-line systems that provide for three different entrance drills—for residents, for guests, and for servants. Troops have occupied parts of the *favelas*, the sprawling slums of Rio ruled by drug-traffickers, but poll-takers have reported that 80 percent of the slum-dwellers approve of the measure. This was topped by a 90-percent approval rate among those living outside the *favelas*.

Two lessons can be drawn from these conditions and from the recent election. One is that ordinary, poor Brazilians are not politicized, in the sense of "seething with discontent." When surveys ask, "What is democracy for you?" the typical response, even among the poor, refers not to social justice but to conventional affirmations of political liberty, freedom of expression, and the like. The other lesson is that Brazilians want a government that works, pretty much regardless of "isms." What really matters is governability: Questions of political form are secondary.

This creates a paradox at a time when democratization has been equated with privatization and the downscaling of government. On the one hand, the government apparatus is bloated. State-owned companies abound, and many of their employees collect salaries without showing up for work. On the other hand, the government is barely able to collect taxes, especially from the well-off. In this respect, Brazil stands about where Spain did nearly twenty years ago, when that country began to democratize after the death of Franco. The state, while not exactly threadbare, has still to marshal the personal and material resources to rule effectively. To reach this goal will mean not just belt-tightening that will pinch the impoverished even more; it will also entail encroaching on the privileges of the powerful, many of whom voted for Cardoso as a prudent alternative to what they perceived as the menace of ardent populism.

Cardoso put together a broad conservative and centrist coalition to defeat his rivals on the left. Most commentators attribute his victory to his skillful performance as finance minister, in particular to his stabilization of a notoriously inflation-prone currency. But fear of social reform of the virulent sort that the Left was thought to represent was perhaps as big a component



of the winning coalition as any principled adherence to monetary respectability. Almost certainly, the coalition will shrink if the implementation of structural changes—for example, even modest agrarian reform—begins to threaten conservatives.

Of the several paths to democracy around the world that have been followed since the mid-1970s, when Portugal began what was to become a march away from authoritarianism, two have proved to be successful. For the others, the outcome remains doubtful, though hopeful. The jury is still out, for example, on the post-Communist scenarios unfolding in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe. One clear success has been the experience of the Iberian peninsula; there is no going back for Portugal or Spain. A somewhat different route, involving a head start in social equity that may have compensated for the alien nature of Western liberal democracy, has been taken in South Korea and Taiwan.

As yet there is no distinctly Brazilian model of democratization. The danger of reversion to nondemocratic rule is past, but the quality of democracy in Brazil is questionable. Material resources are concentrated in a few hands, the educational system fails to absorb and train as many citizens as it should, and the police routinely abuse their powers. Mindful of the analogy with South Africa, Brazilians refer to the syndrome of poverty amid the promise of abundance as social apartheid.

Still, there are inklings of the democratization of everyday life. The landlocked city of São Paulo has no beaches, so on weekends many ordinary citizens decamp to the bucolic grounds of the University of São Paulo. So far the authorities have looked the other way, for fear of provoking turmoil if they were to define this recreational gambit as "an intrusion."

Like the aerodynamically improbable bumblebee, Brazil doesn't quite crash. Some changes have been for the good. The rate of population growth has slowed. Membership in voluntary associations is comparatively high. It may be that to speak of a "model," in a country known for chronic improvisation, will turn out to be a contradiction in terms. It may be that the land of inspired soccer and appalling politics will continue to make up blueprints as it goes along. PETER McDONOUGH

Peter McDonough, author of Power and Ideology in Brazil *(Princeton University Press, 1981), teaches political science at Arizona State University.*

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A SMILE IS THEIR UMBRELLA

POLES LEARN TO GRIN & BEAR IT

"There is a crisis waiting to happen. The new world order will be worse than the cold war."

I am watching an East European expert speak on a CNN report, sound-bite flawless. He is talking about Poland, specifically, because he is Polish and because President Bill Clinton is about to be visiting Warsaw in a few days—but he clearly implies a regional dilemma. I have heard these words before and always taken this man and his colleagues seriously.

Now I am not so sure.

Last summer I was in Warsaw watching his kind speak on CNN, looking out my window and seeing a very different Poland than the "crisis waiting to happen." I saw smiling faces.

I am not Polish. I was paid to go to Poland the first time where, meeting a Polish woman who became my wife, I got caught up in the tragicomedy that is Polish life and history. I used to compare Poland to Italy in terms of how things operated: a crisis daily—without the Mediterranean humor.

We made a movie there: *White Dragon* for CBS, in 1984-86, the first U.S.-Polish coproduction (not services-for-hire). Setting up a situation where Polish filmmakers could work with the freedom and equipment denied them by the Communist government, we discovered the congenital infection of dictatorial socialism: the Poles had forgotten how to take responsibility for themselves.

Before, when things had gone wrong, the blame was clear: censors, shortages, corrupt bureaucrats, antiquated equipment the bankrupt government could not afford to replace. Those excuses removed, the Polish filmmakers revealed a paralyzing inability to perform without a tangible scapegoat. They were not ready to accept responsibility for their own actions. They became easy prey for whoever bullied.

Worse, like the apparatchiks blamed for their country's woes, the upper-echelon Polish filmmakers were revealed as equally corrupt: taking bribes from whoever came with outstretched dollar, stealing funds intended for the Polish crew, falsifying documents, and taking money to spy upon our Western communications—not for the government, but from motives of paranoid jealousy.

For all that, the film was successfully completed. The Polish workers—uncredited, cheated, and derided by the creative "liberals" of the Polish filmmaking intelligentsia—worked hand-in-glove with our American production team to finish on time and under budget. Still, it was a depressing experience in terms of implications for the future.

We should not have been surprised. Poles have long experience in being betrayed by promises—why should they trust us any more than their own government? Wasn't it FDR who carved a hunk out of Poland in the Yalta Agreement? As recently as 1981, just before martial law was imposed on Poland, Ronald Reagan promised Polish workers that the United States would help a "reform" Poland grow strong. Even such a pro-Pole as I could see the lie: what strategic folly would ever induce the United States to shore up a Warsaw Pact nation? The Solidarity movement, blinded by its early successes, failed to distinguish rhetoric from reality; they were left high-and-dry when General Jaruzelski imposed martial law.

American policy is often duplicitous *vis-à-vis* Poland. Jaruzelski's martial law, for all its grim heavy-handedness, had a clear *raison d'etre*: to restore order in a country crippled by strikes, to circumvent a Soviet invasion. (Jaruzelski had been brought in by pro-Solidarity reformers within the party because of his known anticorruption stance.) Polish martial law imprisoned only a few thousand, most released within two months, all by 1984. For this Poland was vilified by the U.S. government, embargoed.

Compare that with China: Tiananmen Square, executions, thousands imprisoned for decades. Presidents George Bush and Clinton annually renew China's most favored nation status.

Examining American policy toward Poland, any Pole has the right to feel betrayed, bothered, and bewildered. Ah, but they love us, that's their crime.

The Polish saga is not about American promises, though, but about where *Matka Polska* goes from here. The seers of fate, those instant experts of the media capsule report, see Yugo-war looming behind every dour face and inflationary statistic. Prophets within Poland warn of "deep divisions in the people," "the Communists will be back."

Maybe so. They were never really gone to begin with.

But, I propose, they'll find that turning back the clock isn't quite so easy. It's hard to fight a smiling face.

Why this emphasis upon smiles? Truth to tell, last summer was the first time I had seen people smiling on Warsaw streets. I had been in Poland for extended periods since 1976. Most of that time Poland was a grey entity, marked by flashes of brilliantly cynical humor and delicate dabs of color, a monochrome of pessimism predominant.

There was no hope—save in the miracle. Since the sixteenth-century "miracle" of Czestochowa, when an icon of the Virgin Mary was credited with defeating a Swedish invasion, Polish popular culture has relied less on its own efforts than on expectation of some miraculous intervention to determine the nation's fate.

For Roman Catholic Poland, such belief has been the consolation of faith supplied by a religious institution that was often the only entity of national identity left its people: a people partitioned among Russia, Prussia, and Austria from the late 1700s until 1918, and crushed under Nazi and Soviet juggernauts since then.

Waiting for miracles can be a frustrating experience. Hope needs to cling onto something more concrete. As recently as 1992, on a Warsaw tram with my family, there was a grim con-

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trast between ourselves and fellow passengers: we were the only ones with anything close to a smile upon our faces. Poland was "de-socializing" and these people were lost: Democracy had not been the miracle to turn their streets to gold.

Not so today. Between '92 and today, Poles found something to believe in: they found themselves.

Nineteen seventy-six: A waitress can expect no tips, knows that the food she serves is second rate, that her rotten-paying job is a life sentence. Nineteen ninety-five: The waitress is part-owner of the cafe and makes sure the food she serves is the best for its price because (a) people tip better then, and (b) there are two competitors across the street. Today she and her partners can easily buy the food they want to sell, for customers who can afford to pay decent prices, and decide for themselves what works and what doesn't. They may fail—and that scares them. But they have something to believe: they believe in the power of money—a very crass ideology, to be sure—but they also believe in their power to make money.

Some people in Poland cry for the purity of the old ideals. These tears are much the same nostalgia an adult has for the "purity" of decision making in elementary school, when teacher made the rules, was the responsible adult telling the children what to do. Few Poles today want to give up their adulthood, their individual responsibility.

After World War II, Communist-type socialism made sense to a Poland devastated by war: When private dreams are shattered beyond recognition, it is better to grasp onto the collective aspiration. A sign of recovery is when the society reaches levels of education and responsibility where individuals begin to dream again.

For decades people had stopped dreaming as individuals. Yes, they had hopes and ambitions, jealousies and desires, but these centered on position to the *status quo* of the Soviet-styled state. Opposition is a reaction, not an aspiration. When Poland passed from communism to democracy, from dysfunctional economic socialism to faltering capitalism, the opposition had won the day—but no one yet knew how to dream for themselves.

They do today.

Could a Communist government be voted back? It's possible. Could that Communist government return Poland to the old regime? How?

Short of a devastating civil war à la Yugoslavia (difficult to imagine given Poland's ethnic homogeneity), how would any government engineer the transition backwards?

This is not a total sunshine observation. The new confidence in Poland is street-level. Institutions—government and incoming Western business—still inspire well-earned cynicism among Poles. In this regard, one must be more wary than ever about Polish society: the "take where you can get it" mentality of the old Soviet socialist days is not altered much by '80s-style capitalist greed. This danger does not discredit the genuine growth of self-confidence among the Polish people, however.

A smile's a smile: hard to fake except by the most polished of liars, actors, or politicians. On the streets of Warsaw, the smiles are genuine.

ROBERT FLEET

Robert Fleet, a writer and filmmaker, lives in Montclair, California.

OF SEVERAL MINDS Abigail McCarthy

HAS ANYBODY THOUGHT OF JOBS?

WITHOUT WORK, THE PEOPLE PERISH

Let's be frank. There is something terrifying about the fact that the president of the United States and the speaker of the House of Representatives rely on popular, best-selling socioeconomic gurus for guidance. None of these gurus seems to have much formal training for the subjects on which they expatiate. But they and the leaders who seek their guidance seem to have unlimited faith in technological change as the key to the complexities of the future.

It is dismaying to hear the president describe himself as the first post-cold war president, the president elected to effect change at the end of the no-longer-relevant Roosevelt era, and to hear him discuss change in terms of class—distancing himself from fellow-citizens no matter how compassionately, by referring to them as "the underclass," talking about "expanding the middle class," etc.

It is more than dismaying to hear the speaker of the House hailing himself as a revolutionary and labeling all those who differ with him as the enemy. He welcomes "the information age" which we have supposedly entered, as the means of down-sizing government and eliminating centralized authority, and he sees little place for anyone not able to cope with the new technology. If, in fact, the governments and the organizations that currently help us form community are on their way out, one of the first fruits of the change seems to be—if the speaker is the exemplar—incivility as the norm of discourse. A return to every man for himself.

Certainly we are facing change. Certainly it is important to define that change and to prepare ourselves to deal with it. But can we not hope that our leaders would rely for guidance on more serious educators than the Gilders and Tofflers who inspire Speaker Gingrich, and the so-called motivational experts—Marianne Williamson, Anthony Robbins, and Steven R. Covey—who were called to Camp David by the president?

Even casual observers can see that the effect of the information age is not so much to inform government officials of the needs of their constituencies as to make them subject to pressure from group after group conveyed by fax, E-mail, what-

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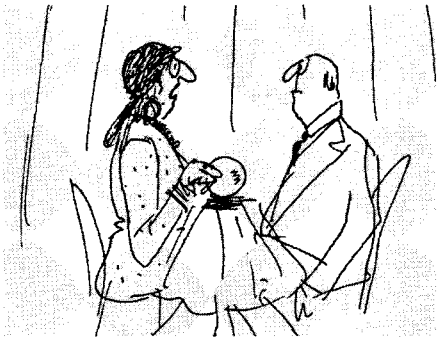
have-you. As columnist David Broder says, electronic democracy is "not all that new; it's a new chapter in an old struggle."

But change there has been, and we must understand it. According to the international businessman's guru, Peter Drucker, who has somewhat better credentials as a social scientist than the president's and the speaker's favorites, our century has indeed been an age of social transformation (*Atlantic Monthly*, November 1994). These transformations have altered not only the society "but the economy, the community, and the polity we live in." And they have been brought about without violence or even much public awareness.

Drucker points out that at the beginning of this century the two largest single groups in developed countries were farmers and house servants. Today, he writes, "*productive* farmers make up...no more than 2 percent of the work force," and they are associated more with agribusiness than with traditional farming. Drucker hazards that by 2000 traditional farmers will be "little but objects of nostalgia," and domestic servants not even that.

Between the beginning of the century and now we have had the rise and the fall of the blue-collar worker. Drucker writes:

> The workers of 1900—and even of 1913—received no pensions, no paid vacation, no overtime pay, no extra pay for Sunday or night work, no health or old-age insurance (except in Germany), no unemployment compensation; they had no job security whatever.
>
> Fifty years later, in the 1950s, industrial workers had become the largest single group in every developed country, and unionized industrial workers in mass-production industry...had attained upper middle-class income levels. They had political power....Thirty-five years later, in 1990, industrial workers and their unions were in retreat.



"I'm afraid your place in the sun has been pre-empted by someone with superior credentials."

Industrial workers have been replaced by "knowledge" workers, a term coined by Drucker in 1959 in his insightful book, *Landmarks of Tomorrow*. Despite all the optimistic talk of retraining, industrial workers are not able to move into the world of knowledge workers in the way that farmers and servants were able to move into industrial work. For one thing, knowledge work, even at the simplest level, requires a good deal more formal education than can easily be acquired by an unemployed industrial worker.

Moreover, in this globalized society, despite the vaunted drop in unemployment figures (where do they get them?), jobs are disappearing. In the global economy all the factors of business production cross borders—capital, investment, plants, management—all except labor, the people who need the jobs.

Richard Barnet of the Institute for Policy Studies wrote in the September 1993 *Harper's*, "The global job crisis is so profound and its interrelated causes are so little understood that the best of the currently fashionable strategies for creating jobs just nibble at the problem; others are likely to make it worse."

Consider only a few of the facts marshaled by Barnet. Between 1979 and 1992, Fortune 500 companies let go *4.4 million* of their employees (italics mine)—the equivalent of 340,000 a year. Not only workers suffer; the unemployment rate for managers rose 55 percent in 1991 as the result of "down-sizing." Human-displacing automation is progressing at a rapid pace, in automobile, electronics, and printing plants, for example. The billions of unemployed worldwide will soon overwhelm us.

If jobs are disappearing, still the real work the world needs done increases. We have to revise our whole view of what work is necessary or valuable. According to Barnet, "There is a colossal amount of work waiting to be done by human beings—building decent places to live, exploring the universe, making cities less dangerous, teaching one another, raising our children, visiting, comforting, healing, feeding one another...inventing things, and governing ourselves." To save ourselves and the world we must rethink work. For that we need more than the help of second-class gurus enamored of technology. □

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TAKE A WALK IN MY PAJAMAS

MY THREE ILLNESSES

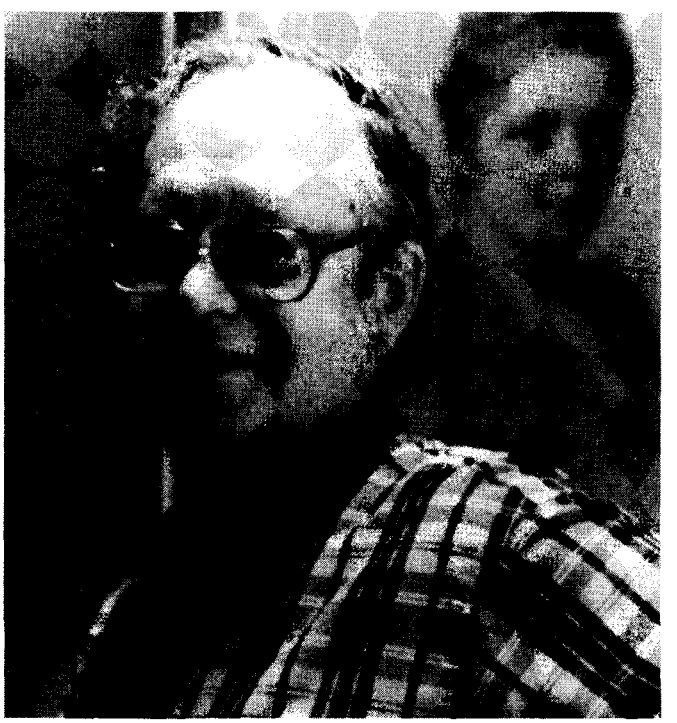
WILFRID SHEED

This was not, I'm relieved to say, exactly written over my dead body—only against my unflagging resistance. I've never been the least interested in the nuts and bolts of sickness and health. In fact, even when I've been so ill myself that there's been no avoiding them, my position has always been "Just tell me what I'm supposed to do, and who do you like in the World Series?"

So how did I come to write about illness? Innocently enough, and extremely circuitously. In the fall of 1989, the late magazine *Lear's* asked me to contribute to a symposium on the meaning of the word *spiritual*, which is the kind of request that usually has the word *wastebasket* written all over it. For people who try to do this stuff for a living, symposiums are strictly amateur night and a chance to be shown up by Jane Fonda or Hulk Hogan or some other muffin-headed celebrity on a roll; who but an actor can work up a full head of seriousness in three hundred words anyhow?

On the other hand I had a soft spot for *Lear's*, which had several friends on it and gave great parties, and for once, I also had something to say on the subject, and I thought, "Just this once—and I promise never to do it again," and wrote the following:

> Last year I was hit by a barrage of ailments that reintroduced me to the joys of recuperation, a pleasure I'd almost forgotten about since I was hit by polio, the A-bomb of diseases, at the end of World War II. (Hiroshima happened the same year: fortunately my life has not kept up this pace.)
>
> The spiritual life becomes very simple when you're sick. You pray to get better, and if and when you do, you don't need to be told to be grateful about it: It gushes out of you. And you discover, in the same giddy rush, that just being alive, even on a no-frills basis, is astoundingly good: and this remains, for me, the primal insight. G. K. Chesterton once said that if a person were to fall into the waters of forgetfulness and come out on the other side, he would think he had arrived in paradise. But all you need to do is spend a couple of months on your back, or return home from a war and come downstairs to have breakfast in your own house (I'm told by veterans that just having a bathroom by yourself can seem like going to heaven).
>
> So my private proofs for God, or whatever, begin with this: the sheer capacity for happiness, and one's sense when it happens, that this is correct and normal and not some freak of nature. When health returns, it feels like coming home, with everything just as you left it: and the other thing, the bad news—the broken leg or even the mental breakdown—feels like the freak. But now you are



WILFRID SHEED, *a former* Commonweal *literary editor (1967–69), is the author of* People Will Always Be Kind, *among other novels and works of criticism. This essay is excerpted from the introductory chapter of* In Love with Daylight: A Memoir of Recovery, *to be published in March.* *© 1995 by Wilfrid Sheed. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster.*

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back where you belong, in harmony with the universe. And from this I deduce with some conviction that the universe is *essentially* a good place to be, despite appearances, and that if it means anything, it means well.

The trick of course is to stay on its good side, and this would take, has taken, hundreds of books to discuss. Let me just say quickly: concentration, kindness, and in my own case the Catholic tradition—there has to be some tradition—which gives me a sense of companionship over the centuries. To which I would add, by way of illustration, that the two most intense and unqualified pleasures I have had in the last year have been respectively the marriage of a son and the birth, courtesy of one of my daughters, of a grandchild. The universe's wishes can be devious beyond exasperation at times, but I like to think that it has its simple pleasures too. And on days like that, even the God of Job can be sensed to smile for a second.

Beyond that I can only hope that if, in the biblical phrase, one lives out one's days "in the eye of God," or at least someplace in the neighborhood, one will someday come to see old age and death as equally natural and simply the next thing to do.

I honestly don't know if this thought will help me then, but it helps me now.

And that, I trusted, was that. It was in truth a blissfully happy time in my life, and I was delighted to tell *someone* about it, but certainly not to make a big production out of it. After all, what was the message? The Secret of Happiness is to get sick, or break a leg, or come back from the dead, or perhaps to imagine that you've done these things and hope for the best. Then, shortly after that, someone else asked me to take part in a symposium about the meaning of God, and I remember jotting down something like this: "If a certain general hadn't ruined the phrase forever, I would say that 'God is the light at the end of the tunnel,' and maybe the light in the tunnel as well, if you're a saint"—but this one I *didn't* send in. It was basically the same thought anyhow, a celebration of waking up from a bad night and falling head over heels in love with daylight, and I felt the public had had enough of my wisdom on this subject, and I had certainly had enough of dispensing it.

However, my soon-to-be friend Phyllis Theroux wrote me a letter after the *Lear's* piece asking permission to reprint and circulate it; and awhile later, after we'd met in person, the same lady suggested, so casually that I doubt she remembers it, that I expand the piece into a book someday.

A thousand times no! My response was a lot more emphatic than her request. There was no way of expanding this particular material without reaching back into the world of sickness that I had just so cheerfully left; and furthermore, if I couldn't read a whole book about health matters without alternately flinching and falling asleep, how on earth was I going to write one?

On the other side of the ledger was a dawning realization that every time the subject came up in conversation, I had something to say about it that the others hadn't heard before and wanted very much to hear now, just in case it applied to them. Everyone has a tryst with sickness someday, or expects to with various degrees of apprehension, so anyone who has visited that country becomes an automatic object of curiosity. How does it look? How did he take it? How would *I* take it?

Insofar as I had learned anything new at all in the land of sickness, it gradually occurred to me that maybe I had no choice. Whether you've witnessed a crime, or discovered a pothole or a cure for insomnia, you simply have to skip your next appointment and testify—especially if you believe you have some honest-to-God, nonsugar-coated good news to report. What we had here, in other words, was the literary equivalent of a subpoena in the hands of a surly witness from whom much of this had to be dragged.

And, as it turned out, I was not to be let off lightly with a novel either. My first instinct, like that of a child who has to confess to something embarrassing, was to make up a fictitious character to whom the whole thing *really* happened. But in matters of sickness and death, you have to put up or shut up; you have to level. Did this happen or didn't it? Does it actually feel like this, or are you just guessing? If you don't know for sure, the experts will move in quick as a blink and sweep your testimony into the disposal, and replace it with the old, outsiders' version, and you might as well have skipped the whole trial.

So stripped (for now—the novel comes next) of the armor of fiction, I toyed for all of five seconds or so with the possibility of writing impersonal nonfiction. Just the facts, ma'am. On the first day, patient complained of such-and-such and noticed so-and-so, a soreness of the this and a swelling of the that. But what you really remember is the moment when the wallpaper began to drive you crazy, especially combined with the doctor's cough: sickness becomes personal immediately. And that's the part people want to hear about. The symptoms they can get from a textbook. What they want right now is to walk for just a day or an hour in your pajamas or hospital gown and listen in on your thoughts and take your measure.

What distinguishes the only three illnesses I've ever had (if you subtract measles, age six) is that all three are generally deemed incurable, and that each has caused me to lose something quite irreplaceable, something I would have sworn I couldn't live without.

The first of my Big Three, polio, cost me, for instance, the world of games, around which my whole world turned: when I wasn't playing them, I was thinking about them and planning a long, happy future with them. ("We're going to Zanzibar this summer!" "Swell—what do they play there? cricket or baseball?")

The second, addiction-depression, deprived me of not just the sleeping pills that brought it on but the whole congenial drinking life, from wine tastings to barbellyings to motor trips through France (who could bear to send back all those wine lists?) to, finally, the best part of all, the solid-gold time spent

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with friends in the small hours, when for a long moment, held like a note of music, you understand each other *perfectly*. In short, it cost me nothing less than the best minutes of the day and the best years of my life. Or so it seemed at the time. Giving up booze felt at first like nothing so much as sitting in a great art gallery and watching the paintings being removed one by one until there was nothing left up there but bare white walls.

White again, the color of death as far as I'm concerned, and back to the hospital for number three, cancer. So far the jury is still out on this one, and long may it remain so, but the Big C, as they call it in show biz, has already left a wintery calling card: without giving away too much, I'll just say that C. has made some mean little inroads into the joy of eating, that last redoubt of the sensual man. But as I quickly learned, cancer, even more than polio, has a disarming way of bargaining downward, beginning with your whole estate and then letting you keep the game warden's cottage or the badminton court; and by the time it has tried to frighten you to death and threatened to take away your very existence, you'd be amazed at how little you're willing to settle for.

But *how* little? A fellow I know lost a whole leg to cancer, and was happier afterward than he'd ever been before, simply because he was alive and the enemy was gone. So one might start the bidding with that. The long, wary truces of cancer that might end at any moment with a call to arms, or might, contrariwise, last forever, send you a command invitation to speculate over and over about precisely why you're putting yourself through all this and whether it's worth it. Is there a point at which life is no longer better than death? Since I've never regarded myself as any kind of Candide or Lemuel Pitkin, who insists on looking on the bright side as life whittles away at his arm, legs, and senses, I'm sure that there must *be* such a point—some moment when you're ready to fold what's left of your hand and say enough is enough. But in spite of some quite serious whittling, I've never even come close to that point myself.

Quite the reverse. After each of my "unbearable, insupportable" losses, I have felt not only undiminished and unready to die, but quite goofily elated, as I tried to describe in *Lear's*. As it happens, shortly after writing that ode, or squawk, to joy, I came across a sublime illustration of the mood I'd been talking about in the form of an old, old movie short built around Johnny Mercer's splendid song "GI Jive," showing an average sort of Sad Sack barely surviving the horrors of army life in World War II and plunging at last into the joys of peace. In the final scene, the war has just ended and our hero capers around a deserted Times Square in civilian clothes, fairly bursting with happiness. *That* was how I had felt after each of my illnesses, even though I wasn't exactly dancing by the end, but leaning, like some black-comic character, on a pair of canes, sipping Diet Coke to keep my mouth from turning to dust, and wondering where the cancer would strike next. If the war is over for now and the bombing has stopped, that's simply how you feel, whatever the damage.

At least, that's how I felt—and by chance, how every survivor I know seems to have felt too. When I was a kid, religious folk would say things like "God only seems to send polio to people who are strong enough to take it," but experience has since told me that the folk had it exactly backward. To judge only from the polio veterans I've known, God has made just about everybody strong enough to take it, so affliction can land where it likes. All landing fields are fully equipped. I have yet to meet a victim of this plague who has not made a *perfect* adjustment to it, and then some—Exhibit A being Franklin Roosevelt, whose gargantuan, cartoonlike self-assurance saw us through war and Depression as if they were just more pool exercises.

Afflictions have an uncanny ability to clean up after themselves, and even leave you laughing, but they obviously can't guarantee to root out deep-seated psychological glitches—although they have a pretty good record with those too.

Mary Crockett Hill

Tangles Not to Be Undone

At night you rise, hair slurred into confession.
Two oranges ripen toward rot on the bedside
table.

You wish you were shooting birds, the body
of a thousand willows, needing no one, a figure

carved from chalk. Sickness is almost done
and you're not sure what to put in its place.

Try the photograph of Uncle Charles as a boy,
Grandmother's rosewood table, Aunt Josie's eyes

bruised and sweet like tobacco. Remember
how Mama would scoop crab apples

from a bowl in the sink, checking each one for spots
as the water strained between her fingers.

How she made us drink Tang and hot tea
until our urine glowed. Wrap your head

in a flannel scarf when winter begins
and only let it out with the crocus

or after, when the world turns ash-soft again,
if sickness will let you go so soon.

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Perhaps the hardest glitches for nature to cope with are those caused by any feel-good chemicals that may have been brought in to help out. The great James Thurber, for instance, was never reconciled to his blindness, partly because it led him in the course of it through countless painful eye operations, each of which must have raised and dashed his hopes brutally; but partly also because he seems to have tried to drink his way out of trouble, and it simply can't be done: booze is like an exit door painted on the wall for which alcoholics and other optimists manage to fall every time. There is no sadder specimen on heaven or earth than an old drunk around two in the morning after he's just hit the wall for the thousandth time, and it doesn't matter *how* good or bad his eyesight is or how many operations he's had.

Which brings me to Illness No. 2, addiction-depression. During the whole time I was under this particular cloud, I would have sold my soul cheerfully (if I could have done anything cheerfully) just to hear from someone else who had passed this way and could tell me what was actually happening to me and what to expect next. But among all the thousands of inspirational and pseudoscientific words I could find on the subject, not one came close either to describing what I was going through, or suggesting anything useful to do about it except go to meetings and talk, talk, talk, which is the water I swim in anyway. So I've had to write it myself, scene for scene—all the things I would like to have read back then.

A book about health is perforce a book about sickness, and in the matter of artificially induced depressions, there seems to be an almost exact equation between down and up, as if one could with a mighty effort turn the minus sign next to one's melancholy into a plus and watch one's spirits rise like mercury—just in time, in my case, to take on Illness No. 3.

No two of these things are identical, and one finds that the cards have been shuffled again for cancer. The usual pattern of remission and recurrence of this illness lends a stop-start quality to any elation you may feel over its high points. Every cheer comes with an asterisk, but so does every groan, as the will to live keeps pounding back. And there's a certain excitement to be had just from living on the edge: you are more fully alive then you have ever been, and getting more out of each day. My late friend Anatole Broyard reported being suffused with an unearthly euphoria when he first got wind of his cancer, along with a curious sense of superiority to average mortals, who never get to see their lives as clearly as he now saw his. Civilian readers I talked to about Broyard's epiphany couldn't make head or tail of it, but it made perfect sense to me. Although I had never greeted my own bad news in that particular way, it was certainly in the realm of possibility. It's just that Anatole received his apocalypse a little earlier than most, and was spared the dark night that usually precedes it.

For most of us, there's no avoiding the fact that learning you've got cancer can be a gruesome experience, especially if your system is depressed at the time anyway, as mine was; but even with your heart wedged deep in your boots, the speed of mental adjustment can be quite uncanny, and the number of people I've known who've lived and died anywhere from serenely to downright happily with cancer defies normal imagining, almost as Broyard's essay did [*Intoxicated by My Illness*, Clarkson Potter].

I guess the revelation for me was to find that a good death doesn't defy imagining at all, once you've had cancer yourself for even a little while. With that thunderclap event, why aren't we all out dancing right now? Well, there are complications. Once one's old self has moved back in, new stories will start up, and some of them will probably be sad ones. For reasons dating back at least to the Garden of Eden, the greatest happiness imaginable wears off with sickening speed and suddenly isn't good enough for us. A religious person might point out that we weren't put on earth to dance all day anyway, although some returners from hell come awfully close to it. A friend of mine who spent four years in the Pacific Theater of the Absurd in World War II, flinching from trees that might or might not contain Japanese soldiers and jumping out of his skin every time a twig snapped, told me that he could hardly look at his suburban lawn of an evening without wanting to kiss it. "Life can't *get* dull enough for me," he said.

This would be an extreme case: if you go down far enough you might conceivably stay up forever, which is something for depression cases to look forward to, if they can still look forward to anything in that condition. But for the run of mankind, the dancing does have to stop sometime, and you are left with nothing but an unbelievably good memory.

Which, as I said in *Lear's*, I've been living off ever since. □

Richard E. McMullen

Pills and Tablets

Each time
the man laid out
the medicines, he saw it. Pills,
tablets stood
impossibly
on edge. His dead
hand, groping
back toward life,
forgot the hidden spin
the hand puts
on everything.

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COMMONWEAL

February 24, 1995 • Special Supplement

Religion & the Media: Three 70th Anniversary Forums

Media treatment of religion has become a neuralgic issue. The perception of bias, unfairness, or outright distortion has reached the point where many groups assume that their views will not be accurately reported. Since the secular media are the primary source of news and information for most Americans, inaccuracy and unfairness pose a major challenge to the credibility of both religion and the media. As part of its 70th anniversary celebration, *Commonweal* invited journalists and religious leaders to participate in three public forums exploring these troubled relations. Speakers, panelists, and discussants brought candid and knowledgeable observations to these lively and extended conversations, which appear here in edited versions.

CHICAGO

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Martin Marty is a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School and a senior editor of the *Christian Century*.
Peter Steinfels is senior religion correspondent of the *New York Times*.
Daniel J. Lehmann is a reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.
Carol Marin is a reporter and co-anchor for WMAQ-TV in Chicago.
David Neff is executive editor of *Christianity Today*.
Don Wycliff served on the editorial board of the *New York Times* and is currently editorial page editor of the *Chicago Tribune*.

WASHINGTON

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Tim Russert is NBC-TV Washington bureau chief and moderator of "Meet the Press."
E.J. Dionne, Jr., former Rome correspondent for the *New York Times*, is a columnist and editorial writer for the *Washington Post*.
Helen Alvare is a lawyer and prolife spokesperson for the U.S. Catholic Conference.
John Dart is a religion reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and co-author of *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media*.
Terry Eastland is editor of *Forbes MediaCritic*.
Cokie Roberts reports for ABC News and National Public Radio.

NEW YORK

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Judith Banki, of the Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Foundation, is a veteran participant in interreligious dialogue.
Peter Steinfels is senior religion correspondent of the *New York Times*.
William F. Baker, with long experience in commercial television, is president and CEO of Thirteen/WNET, New York's public television station.
Randall Balmer is professor of religion at Barnard College and author of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, a study of Evangelicals in the United States.
John Leo writes a column "On Society" for *U.S. News & World Report*.
Mary Alice Williams who was news anchor for CNN and covered religion for NBC-TV, now heads her own production company.

The Commonweal Forums were supported by a grant from the Catholic Communication Campaign. Our thanks as well to John Piderit, S.J., Loyola University; Leo O'Donovan, S.J., Georgetown; and Joseph O'Hare, S.J., Fordham, who graciously welcomed the forums to their campuses.

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CHICAGO

Loyola University, Chicago

Peter Steinfels
New York Times

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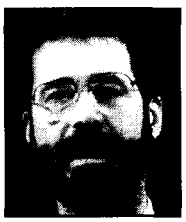

David Neff
Christianity Today

Daniel Lehmann
Chicago Sun-Times

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Peter Steinfels

Religion and the media is a topic surrounded by hypersensitivity, if not downright paranoia. I recently received a newsletter from a conservative Christian group charging that religion was invisibile in the media. That is actually relatively uninflammatory language as far as this discussion goes. But is it true?

I decided to conduct a little survey of articles that dealt with religion in the *New York Times* between Saturday, May 28 and Tuesday, June 7 [1994], an eleven-day period. Now it happens that this period included a major series of articles on the Catholic Church in the United States—four articles involving months of work that, starting on Sunday May 29, ran on page one with a full page or more of text, graphs, photos, and sidebars, on the inside of the paper. But there were also thirty-six other articles dealing with groups ranging from Orthodox Jews and mainline Protestants to Muslims, Mormons, and self-styled witches. A number of these stories began on page one, alongside photos with religious content, whether portraying John Paul II meeting with the Clintons or a church in Rwanda that had been the site of massacres. Other stories were to be found everywhere from the foreign and domestic news pages to the Metropolitan Report, from the business section to "Arts and Leisure," from the editorial pages to the Sunday Style section.

All of this indicates, I believe, that religion is at least visible in some parts of the media. It suggests that we should approach this topic in a measured mood. It does not, however, demonstrate that all is well with the media's handling of religion. After all, the *New York Times* is a huge paper. Acres of trees are sacrificed to produce each Sunday's edition, and carrying that paper around can easily cause tennis elbow if not outright hernia. Even though we ran a lot of stories about religion and an exceptionally lengthy and thorough examination of the Catholic Church, at the same time we were nonetheless devoting far more inches to the Knicks and the Rangers and their fortunes in the basketball and hockey playoffs.

And other findings lend credence to the charge of invisibility: The Media Research Center, a conservative watchdog group, surveyed ABC's "World News Tonight," CBS's "Evening News," CNN's "World News," NBC's "Nightly News," and the "MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour." They didn't include Waco or the World Trade Center bombing stories, except where theology and religion were stressed. They found that of more than 18,000 story segments on those broadcasts in 1993, not counting weekends, only 212 dealt with religion. Furthermore, a quarter of those stories were aired during Pope John Paul II's trip to the U.S. About 60 percent of the stories were about Catholics, with Supreme Court church-and-state cases and reports on the religious right in second place. Islam, incidentally, did better than Jews or specific Protestant or other religious groups.

The same study looked at ABC's "Good Morning America," CBS's "This Morning," and NBC's "Today": each had two hours of airtime daily. Religion was the subject of 197 stories, less than half of them interviews or reporter-based reports as distinguished from brief stories narrated by an anchorperson. That is out of more than 23,000 stories, again not counting weekends. On magazine shows and Sunday talk shows, only 18 segments in 1993 covered religion, again with Catholics dominating, except that here clerical sex abuse or celibacy outran the papal visit. Although the study's conservative origins naturally influenced its further examination of how the media treat certain topics like abortion, these numbers are fairly objective—and telling.

As far as the print media go, there are reasons beyond numbers and column inches for the anger, distrust, and complaints about religion coverage.

Journalists considerably overestimate readers' attention to the distinctions between editorials, opinion columns, criticism reviews—and straight news stories. Encountering in the *New York Times*'s editorials, columns, and criticism, for

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example, almost unrelievedly liberal opinions and attitudes toward traditional morality that range from indifference to derision, these readers naturally expect the same in our news columns—and they will find it regardless of all our protestations, and indeed practical efforts, to the end of keeping editorial and reportorial treatments separate.

The *Times* was almost alone, for example, in deciding that, in the absence of more impressive evidence, the lawsuit charging Cardinal Joseph Bernardin with sexual abuse was worthy of no more than three or four paragraphs on page twenty-seven, and when that lawsuit was withdrawn by the accuser, the paper, a bit mechanically in my opinion, reported the dropping of charges in a similar low-key fashion. Nonetheless I have learned of readers complaining that we played the accusations on page one while relegating the retraction to a tiny article.

Gus Niebuhr, before joining the *Times* as a fellow religion reporter, had a similar experience at the *Washington Post*. The *Post* received an accusatory letter from a prominent Washington Roman Catholic, who said the paper had not run any coverage of World Youth Day in Denver. The letter writer accused the paper of only printing stories calculated to divide Catholics and stir controversy. Niebuhr went back and found that the *Post* had run eleven stories on World Youth Day, ten of them in the front section, four of them on page one. The headline of the lead story on the event, accompanied with a photograph, had read: "Youths Gather in Denver to See Pope; 'Catholic Woodstock' Is Replete with Virtues and None of the Vices."

We are faced, then, with a mixed picture. Complaints about the media's treatment of religion have a sound basis. But they are also frequently exaggerated or inflated. Nonetheless it is widely recognized in journalistic ranks that the news media's presentation of religion is less than satisfactory. The more controversial question, and one that will govern our search for improvement, is why this is so.

There are three standard explanations for the media's shortcomings.

First, ideology: journalists are ideologically opposed to religion or unusually influenced by negative stereotypes of most faiths and believers.

Second, the three "i's": ignorance, incompetence, insufficient resources.

Third, the framework of journalism itself, the working definitions of news, and the practical conditions under which it is carried out.

First, ideology. The media, it is charged, have a protracted case of H. L. Menckenitis. In 1980, as part of a study of media elites, S. Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter, and Stanley Rothman surveyed a sample of 240 journalists at seven major national news outlets in Washington and New York: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the three major networks, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. Eighty-six percent said they seldom or never attended religious services. Half said "none" when asked "What is your present religious preference?" These results swiftly came to rival biblical inerrancy as part of the basic belief system of many conservative Christians and political true believers.

In a study completed in 1993 for the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, John Dart, veteran religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, and the Reverend Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, traced the misuse of the Rothman-Lichter data. They quote an editorial in the Evangelical flagship journal *Christianity Today* observing that "Studies have shown that news journalists are among the least churched, least religiously informed groups in the United States." (Rothman and Lichter had, of course, found nothing at all about their elite journalists' level of religious information.) An article in the same issue of *Christianity Today* declared that "86 percent of the journalists in a typical newsroom seldom or never attend a church or synagogue."In fact, these statements are mild extensions of the data compared to others in more polemical sources.

Dart and Allen contrasted these findings to their own poll in which only 4 percent of the nation's religion writers and 9 percent of the editors surveyed responded to a query about religion with "none," slightly less than the 10 percent found in most polls of the public. Of the religion writers, 75 percent said religion was "very important" in their lives; of the editors, 72 percent said either very important or somewhat important. The specialists, in effect, were somewhat more religious than the public-at-large, the editors somewhat less but not at all the secular-minded crew portrayed in the Rothman-Lichter study.

Allen and Dart argued that their results matched a 1985 study by Ernest C. Hynds of the University of Georgia and another study by Judith M. Buddenbaum of Colorado State University, as well as yet another study in 1982-83, repeat-

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ed in 1992, that phoned 1400 journalists at papers, broadcast outlets, news magazines, and wire services. In 1992, 72 percent of those surveyed said religion was very or somewhat important, 17.5 percent said not very, and 10.7 said not at all. In defense of the original study, Stanley Rothman replied that it was sampling a different group of journalists than Allen and Dart's study. It did not focus on religion writers at all, for instance, and on the other hand covered television people.

Here it might be worth underlining that another element in the Allen and Dart report, an analysis of religion stories in four papers (*New York Times*, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, *Atlanta Constitution*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*) in March and November 1992, showed that their own religion reporters as well as religion specialists on the wire services accounted for between 41 and 23 percent of the religion stories. Rothman was saying in effect, that Allen and Dart were surveying a special group plus smalltown editors rather than national communicators, who were setting the media agenda. He further criticized their low return rate and failure to test whether it might be causing biased results. And finally he pointed out the apparent contradiction between all the religiosity that Allen and Dart found among journalists with the newsroom ignorance and indifference that the same writers and indeed many journalists themselves reported as obstacles to good reporting.

Turn for a moment from these efforts to quantify to the personal testimony of people in the business. Both Kenneth Woodward at *Newsweek* and Richard Ostling at *Time* have said that the Lichter-Rothman findings pretty much matched the environment they worked in. Bryan Healy, senior political producer for CBS News, told a conference at Columbia University a year ago: "It is the rare executive or senior producer who wakes up on any morning with a thought of theology or theocracy on his or her mind. And if they do care about religion at home, it rarely survives the commute to the office."

Healy thinks this is due to bias and lack of openness. "I think partisan, personal, and political biases of liberal journalists often dominate newsrooms. Most of my colleagues are one-minded, and it's a mind that's made up; there is rarely any debate in most television newsrooms on abortion, birth control, celibacy, curriculum oversight, gays in the military, premarital chastity, or condom distribution in high schools."

Saying that he had to disagree with Healy and with another speaker at the Columbia conference, Gus Niebuhr drew on his experience at the *Atlanta Constitution* as well as "among the editors that I've dealt with at two national newspapers," the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. "There is an interest in religion," he said. "There is a willingness to take religion seriously, and there's a feeling that it has its place on the front page." My own experience is closer to Niebuhr's than to Woodward's, Ostling's, or Healy's.

Apart from being deeply antireligious or simply areligious, is there an ideology at work in the media, or maybe simply a para-ideology, that affects religion coverage?

I think that there is. Modern journalism was born in the decades before World War I. Muckraking was that era's typical form of rebellion against both the gilded violence of the Robber Barons and the faded gentility of nineteenth-century Victorianism, against Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly and Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence*. From that period's Progressive muckraking, the press inherits its suspicion of figures in authority and of all high-minded statements. Practice can be counted on not to measure up to preachment, and preachment is, of course, a specialty of religion.

What is peculiar to this para-ideology is a debunking attitude to all authority and ideals, rather than only religion. Religious stereotypes operate in the world of journalism. Fundamentalists are imagined to be half-literate at best. The Catholic Church is something like the Marine Corps, with papal documents and statements by cardinals constituting marching orders and anything less than immediate submission equivalent to mutiny in the ranks. Rural Methodists are harmless teetotalers who live for church picnics. But these stereotypes are probably no more than those that exist among Americans-at-large. Don't forget that more caricatures of religious positions are probably broadcast from pulpits on one weekend than from television in a year. I have found little evidence that churchgoing or religiously observant journalists are less likely to entertain stereotypes of others' faiths than their nonbelieving colleagues.

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Newsrooms are also caught up in the contemporary culture wars. Roughly speaking, American society is torn between two broad perspectives. One sees traditional morality as enshrining a legacy of wisdom about how we should live together and therefore challengers to that legacy as deserving of a skeptical or jaundiced examination. Another view looks on traditional morality as enshrining a host of prejudices from which we need to be liberated—indeed it considers the proudest moments of recent history to be those when people were liberated from inherited prejudices. Accordingly it looks on those who defy that traditional morality as at least deserving sympathetic attention, and as probably exhibiting a degree of bravery.

This cultural divison is reflected in our fights over abortion, sexual morality generally, and a lot of other questions.

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The Catholic Church and the more outspoken Evangelicals have often taken highly visible positions that make them representatives of one side in this conflict. Compare, for example, the treatment of the Catholic Church in the media to the coverage of the Salvation Army, which holds equally traditional or even more traditional positions on controversial questions of personal morality but has chosen to stress social service and direct assistance rather than interventions in the public debates.

But there is another ideological factor that enters into religion coverage, and that is the professional ideology of journalism, the ethic of objectivity or balance. This should never be discounted. Let me give one example.

On the day that a Supreme Court decision about abortion was handed down—I can no longer remember which decision it was or which side it gave comfort to—a colleague was asked to write a sidebar to the main report. From previous conversations it was my impression that she was vehement, not to say vitriolic, on the question, and I held my breath to see what her story would be like. Well, if the result was biased, in my judgment it was biased, at the very most, 55 to 45 in the direction of her beliefs. Why? Simply because she had abided by the rules of good journalistic practice, contacting both sides and quoting them accurately and in fair proportion.

I will return to ideology, but let me proceed for now to the second reason for news media failings in covering religion, the three "i's"—ignorance, incompetence, and inadequate resources. Let's take them in reverse order because a lot could be done about ignorance and incompetence if there were adequate resources.

The best estimate is that fewer than 70 of the nation's 1,500 daily papers have religion specialists. That is not as bad as it looks. Many of those specialists work on the larger dailies in our major cities (a few of which have two reporters on the beat) and also on the wire services that are used by papers, radio, and TV throughout the country.

But television has long been a wasteland as far as religion specialists go. Recently ABC hired as the first network religion correspondent Peggy Wehmeyer, who had been one of the very few reporters covering religion for a local station, the ABC affiliate in Dallas. National Public Radio assigned a reporter to cover religion, and its "Talk of the Nation" program with Ray Suarez began giving intelligent attention to religion. But perhaps as critical as the limited number of knowledgeable reporters is the lack of religion expertise in the editorial ranks that propose and edit the articles done by other reporters, especially foreign correspondents.

Second, what about incompetence? Many smaller and medium-sized papers have treated religion as a beat anyone pulled out of the newsroom can do. "Overt antireligious sentiments are rare," Dart and Allen concluded, "but uninformed reporters are too often intellectually lazy about getting their facts straight when assigned to cover religion stories."

Last spring Monsigner Francis Maniscalco, who heads the media office for the Catholic bishops, recounted a call from a reporter who said he was interested in finding out more about the pope's apostolic letter restricting priestly ordination to males. Msgr. Maniscalco replied that since the papal statement was only a few pages long, he'd be happy to mail or fax the reporter a copy. The reporter replied, "Well, I'm not *that* interested."

Then there is the tape, broadcast on National Public Radio, of the briefing a Baylor University religion professor conducted for reporters during the Waco standoff between government agents and David Koresh's Branch Davidians. The professor was explaining the sect's reliance on the Book of Revelation. One reporter interrupted.

Reporter: Where do we find this book of Revelation? I'm not very knowledgeable.

Professor: Okay, it's the last book in the Bible in the New Testament.

Reporter: So it's in the Bible in the New Testament?

Professor: Right, uh huh, uh huh.

Incompetence in the press is rife, and we do far too little about it. Public self-criticism is inhibited by professional chumminess but the inhibition is reinforced by the fact that media people are not only chums but competitors, and criticism of a competitor's performance appears embarrassingly self-interested. As a profession we are actually more concerned about bias than incompetence, because frankly it is a more interesting problem to examine. So too the various watchdog groups, each with its own ideological axe to grind, concentrate on bias rather than incompetence, and some operate in any case with little sense of the media's working conditions.

Third, ignorance. It cannot be overestimated. In the Allen and Dart study, nearly 60 percent of the religion writers surveyed reported having had no formal training in religious studies. Over 75 percent thought such studies would be helpful, and another 14 percent judged them essential. Only 10 percent considered them not at all necessary.

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In fact, we are all, almost inevitably, ignorant. Covering religion is a special problem in the United States. In many countries, religion is a one-church story or a one-and-a-half-church story. In England, the Church of England plus the others. In France, the Catholic Church plus the others. In the United States we have a score of significant Christian groups, and hundreds of smaller ones. Many have ethnic or regional variations. We have four Jewish denominations, and several significant strands among the Orthodox alone. There is Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American religion, each with its subdivisions. There is Santeria and goddess-worship and Scientology and Fundamentalists Anonymous and so on.

I have compared the lone religion reporter's situation to the absurdity of asking one reporter to cover all sports, from baseball and boxing to yachting and stock-car racing, from cricket to ski-jumping, with responsibility for knowing all the rulebooks, the teams, the outstanding performers, the history and lore and behind-the-scenes squabbles, covering the weekly contests as well as the championship events, from Super Sunday to the Indianapolis 500, from the Stanley Cup to the Kentucky Derby, from Mike Tyson's trial to the baseball strike.

With diligence many religion reporters do their best to overcome their inevitable lack of knowledge, especially the lack of that kind of knowledge that only comes from direct contact and empathetic experience. The problem is more difficult on the level of editors, who by nature of their primary assignments cannot turn to educating themselves in the multiple forms of American religion. Quite often one encounters editors who are not at all hostile to religion, who may be active churchgoers or observant Jews, who may be well informed about their faith, but whose exposure, commitment, and knowledge remain limited to the faith of their upbringing.

The worst ignorance, of course, is the ignorance that's too dumb to know it's ignorant.

Third and finally, the framework of journalism itself: its conceptual framework—the way that news is defined—and also its practical framework, the conditions under which news reports are produced.

The news media were developed primarily to report on politics, sports, and business—and to entertain. From these primary preoccupations we have inherited certain forms and expectations. There are winners and losers, the ins and the outs, who's up in the stock market and who's down. None of that applies very well to religion coverage. So what does this really mean? Is there going to be a schism in the church? Are women abandoning religion? Are young people returning to religion? Is the pope blessing capitalism? Are the Gospels a cover-up?

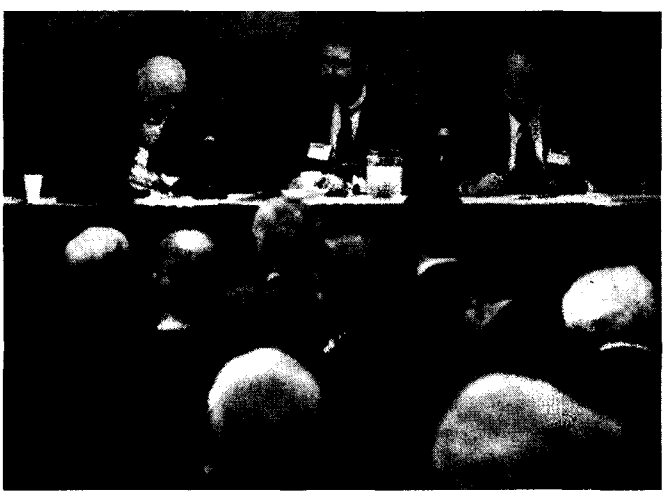
When you have to spell out the nuances and qualifications attached to almost any religious statement, when you have to tell an editor that we may not know the outcome of this struggle for several decades or perhaps several centuries, enthusiasm for the story definitely tends to flag.

Father Avery Dulles recently tried to analyze some of the sources of tension between the news media and the Catholic Church and his insights can be extended to religious faiths generally (*America*, October 1, 1994). Religion centers on a mystery to be approached in a posture of reverence. The press is investigative, iconoclastic, and primed to expose pretensions, falsehoods, and hypocrisies. Convinced that its message is permanently valuable, religion shuns innovation and seeks commitment to truth. The press lives off novelty and "itching ears"; it stays neutral. Religion seeks to reconcile, or at least to suppress discord. The media stress conflict. Religion deals with interior matters. The press looks to the tangible. Religious bodies are frequently hierarchical and authoritative. The press is democratic and questioning. Religious teaching is often compex and subtle. The media want things short and simple.

Journalists have great room for creativity in conceiving stories, pitching them to editors, reporting and writing them. Nonetheless it is hard to escape certain elements: for example, the need for conflict, the unexpected, or the unusual. And it is hard not to get trapped by the very elements that one has invoked to win column space or broadcast time, not to let these elements be highlighted to the point of distortion.

Turn to the practical conditions under which news must be gathered and presented. I certainly remember the shock of space limitations I felt when I arrived at the *New York Times*. One column was about 900 words and it's even less now that we have conceded to the realities of modern eyesight the need for additional space between columns and lines of type. A page in a magazine like *Commonweal*, the *New Republic*, or the *Christian Century* is about 1,000 words. I used to be only clearing my throat in that space.

In addition, since any given story is probably the only one I'll be doing on Christian Science or African-American Baptists in eight months, or maybe in two years, I have to devote a great deal of space to capsule explanations of Christian Science theology or black Baptist history, so that



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it seems there are only sixty or seventy words left over to report the specific development that was the basis for the story in the first place.

Then there is the pressure of time. Fortunately, I can devote several days, sometimes a week, to many religion stories. But there are frequent cases of getting an assignment at 10:30 A.M. or even 12:30 P.M. and having to produce a story by 5 or 6 P.M. The pressure of time is related to the problem of preconceptions. It is very hard, under those constraints, to embark on a general, exploratory fishing expedition or risk what, to mix metaphors, might prove a wild goose chase. What authorities are you going to call? Theologians, representatives of women's groups, politicians, historians, anthropologists, sociologists? You are practically forced to begin with a strong hypothesis, a kind of shadow story in mind. Suppose your hypothesis or imagined story turns out to be wrong? The ethical and professional thing to do is stop and reverse directions even if it's now 4:30 or 5:30 in the afternoon. The harder case is when you turn up something more ambiguous, say, that the story line you're pursuing is not false, but also not as important or relevant as some other related direction. It's virtually impossible to switch gears in midafternoon and even when you have more time, you have already invested a lot of effort into exploring one possibility.

I remember when I was pursuing the question of how much Muslims in the United States were divided by their ethnic loyalties and the differing political concerns in their Muslim homelands. Then a very well-informed Muslim told me, well yes, that was all true, but what really stirred divisions in most of the Muslim communities she knew was disagreement about which day marked the beginning of Ramadan. There was no room in my story for perhaps the most interesting thing I discovered, how Muslims in the United States were reinventing many of their religious institutions to fit the American environment and often imitating the established patterns of churches and synagogues in the process.

The usual solution is to put such belated discoveries on a list for the future. But the end result of working under tight pressures of time is that we abide by the law of journalism that says the news media do not in fact tell new stories as much as find new ways to retell old stories.

How do I finally apportion degrees of responsibility for media failures in religion coverage among the factors I have described? Of course, I cannot really quantify these matters, and, of course, the reality actually varies from one form of media to another and from one outlet to another within each form.

But for the sake of argument I'll assign responsibility symmetrically to the three sorts of causes: one-third to ideological hostility; one-third to ignorance, incompetence and insufficient resources; one-third to the inherited definitions of news and the inherent constraints of time and space.

On this three-legged stool I rest. Thank you.

DISCUSSION

Don Wycliff: I keep on a bulletin board next to my desk a quotation from *Hamlet*, a line spoken right after he and his friend Horatio have seen the ghost of Hamlet's father. Horatio, a modern man of the world, is astonished at the sight. Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." That line points to an epistemological divide: on one side, religion, and on the other, whatever there is that we deal with in the modern world. A certain amount of interpretation is involved in bridging that divide, but the beginning of the whole thing is a certain amount of respect for one's ignorance. The worst ignorance is that which doesn't know it's ignorant. I know there's a lot of ignorance among journalists.

My experience for the last ten years or so has been on the editorial opinion side of things, at the *Tribune* but previously at the *New York Times*. I find two facts predominate. First, appalling ignorance of religion. I don't claim to be a theologian, but I know enough to be respectful of what I don't know, and a lot of people are not. Second, there is also a kind of a puerile attitude among a lot of journalists. They grew up and were told: Don't do this; don't do that; you'll go to hell. They've been in rebellion ever since. So as soon as anybody or anything religious comes up, they're hearing those voices from their childhood, not appreciating that there may be something substantive there.

The fact of this epistemological divide came through most clearly to me after Waco. I remember the morning afterwards going into our editorial room. We talked. Everybody was appalled. All I could think was that there had been a huge gulf in understanding, in communication, at work in Waco. I don't mean communication in that Cool-Hand Luke failure-to-communicate way. These people were perhaps using the same language but talking about different realities seen in radically different ways.

I think that is the same thing that's at work in most newsrooms. A lot of journalists don't appreciate that religion is not a different reality, but a different way of seeing reality. There is thus not the inclination to try to understand it on its own terms.

Aside from those high-minded philosophical differences, there's some plain old animus. I say this, as a Catholic myself: the Catholic Church's position on abortion has not won it a lot of friends. It has made it a lot of enemies. I've seen that at work in newsrooms and editorial board rooms where decisions are influenced by an animus born of that policy disagreement.

Carol Marin: I come to you as somebody who is not a religion reporter nor have I ever been one. When I started in 1972 with WBIR-TV in Knoxville, Tennessee, we had a five-minute Billy Graham news segment, a syndicated reli-

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gious discussion. The first religious story I ever covered was the snake handlers of the Holiness Church of God in Jesus' Name. Those two events taught me two things. The Billy Graham segment taught me that the media are not monolithic. They are a continually evolving and truly varied representation of many approaches. The snake handlers taught me that there's no room for contempt on any level for any article of faith or any believer. Whatever I might have thought about drinking strychnine and handling snakes, which they did and which they believed was biblically justified, the two men I met were like me, like any number of people who have a belief, who live in a community, who support the community, and who are often misunderstood.

What Peter offered in his speech was comprehensive, fair, and accurate: there is incompetence, there are insufficient resources, there's profound ignorance. I don't very often find contempt for religions or religious people. What troubles me is litmus tests, such as the studies that Peter talked about, where it's judged meaningful if [a reporter or editor] regularly attends religious services, whether you consider yourself religious, whether you belong to an organized faith. I take the position that one of your obligations as a journalist is to give up, for the time that you're a journalist, some of your rights and privileges as a citizen in order to have the privilege of being a reporter. And that means in whatever faith I was raised, or whatever faith I do or do not hold these days, that I don't carry that as baggage or as an attitude into the stories that I cover.

So if I'm a Protestant, I do not bring Protestantism to my story. I may have a greater understanding of what that faith is, but there is great care and great deliberateness in saying that what I am personally is something that should not be imposed professionally. I'm not speaking now of columnists or people who do analysis. I'm talking strictly about reporters. By their natures, reporters are mostly not joiners. They didn't belong to sororities. They didn't belong to fraternities. They don't join clubs. They don't go to Tupperware parties. They don't go. And, yes, they are suspicious of authority and I think that's appropriate: Not to be contemptuous of authority, but to remember that authority, including cardinals, bishops, popes, are people who work for their flock, just like presidents work for us. It's not to deny them the faith or the respect that they deserve, but it is to explore who they are and what they do.

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Carol Marin

There are no debates in newsrooms about abortions or the death penalty. Insufficient resources have shrunk most newsrooms, certainly television newsrooms. You don't see your colleagues until the end of the day. You are racing in. When I started, we would sit and watch the newscast together after we'd edited our pieces. The amount of work that reporters now do, the different places to which they are sent, the multiple stories they may do in a day militate against that. If there is an absence of discussion, that is because there are fewer of us. We are expected to cover more, and I think that's part of what is perceived, and rightfully so in many cases, as the shallowness of our coverage.

I live in a newsroom where one of the best reporters we have most regularly covered the controversies of the Catholic Church. She has been excoriated for doing so because she broke some of the pedophile stories before the [Chicago] archdiocese was as open as it currently is about this subject. That reporter sits with a picture of herself, her husband, and the pope on their wedding trip as they're kissing his ring. She exists in a profoundly Catholic personal environment. She has been criticized by mainline Catholics, including members of the archdiocese, for being someone unfaithful to her religion; but, in fact, she's understood that the search for some basic truth in some ways is a transcendent ethic and is the ultimate morality.

David Neff: I get phone calls from reporters who are trying to figure out what Evangelicals are up to. A frequent question I am asked is what is an Evangelical. Heck, we're still trying to figure that out in our magazine, and I've got several, many definitions. We do face a major problem in educating those who are working in the press about Protestantism, in general, and about Evangelical Protestantism, in particular, because it is a rather shapeless movement. There are certain things that hold Evangelical Protestants together, but they are very, very diverse. When I read a political story, as I did this morning in the *Tribune* about the elections in Iowa and Virginia where Evangelical Protestants are supposed to be playing a major role, I don't recognize myself as part of that political force that's being characterized.

Let me say just a little bit about Evangelicals and some conservatives who raise the question of visibility or hostility when it comes to media and religion. Among some of them, there's a sense of being dispossessed culturally. At one time, the Fundamentalism that preceded Evangelicalism in this country was not only culturally dispossessed, but economically dispossessed. It was very much a working-class religion, and there was a kind of coming up through the ranks, a bootstraps sort of thing that happens through education and other ways. A lot of Fundamentalists shed that term Fundamentalism and became Evangelicals. They chose that term for themselves, and now

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while there's plenty of food on the table, while their children go to some of the best colleges in the country, while they have multiple vehicles in their garages, there is still a sense that somehow they don't really belong. They don't really have a place in the power structures in this country, whether that's in the universities or in the media or wherever.

Evangelical Protestantism is changing, and it's changing rapidly. David Bennington, who's a historian of religion at the University of Sterling, in the British Isles, has argued, I think very persuasively, that Evangelicalism is very adaptive. That it isn't just one thing that can be traced from year to year and decade to decade. And here is how he is right, right now. The therapeutic culture in this country really has thoroughly permeated Evangelical Christianity. This is something that I'm not particularly fond of reporting. But I think it's a largely unreported story. And whereas the world was once seen largely in terms of the simpleness of human beings and the radical saving acts of God, and that eventual, otherworldly destination, it is very much now a this-worldly kind of experience, seeking some sort of therapeutic religious salvation in the present. All the old language is still there. But the focus of the experience is quite different. That's a very hard thing to communicate, I think, to many reporters. And it shows a major shift in the way Evangelical religion is experienced.

Let me say another thing about another grossly underreported story. And this is where that invisibility factor comes in. Perhaps some of you read a book by sociologist David Martin several years back which reported on the spread of Pentacostalism in Latin America. It was a very solid book. But there was a section in the preface in which he pointed out that he simply could not get his peers in sociology to pay attention to what he was saying, because in the academic arena in which they were moving, where religion was happening in Latin America was liberation theology. No one bothered to notice all the little storefront churches that were popping up all over the cities of Latin America. There was no key spokesperson for this movement. There was no hierarchy. There was nothing except this tremendous ground swell. And if you didn't happen to ride down the streets of major Latin American cities and actually look to see what was happening, you could miss it entirely. Well, he rode down the streets. He found it. He reported it, and he was roundly criticized.

Daniel Lehmann: Peter talked about the difficulty of dealing with an issue, given the space limitations of the daily newspaper. Well, from my standpoint of working for the *Chicago Sun Times*, Peter works for the Shakespeare edition, I work for the Cliff Notes version. That's a point that's forgotten too many times among writers of a specialty beat. What we do is simply a glimpse at a subject.

What we do, I believe, at most newspapers, what we produce everyday is a daily art form. We write stories that are

extremely transitory. We are, indeed, sort of one-hit wonders of once every nine months to a year on a particular topic.

In many ways our editors, certainly mine, are increasingly driven by marketing and market shares. And that means turning out the editorial product and responding to what readers say they are interested in. And, therefore, in a city such as Chicago, and I think much the same is probably true in New York, with 40 something percent of the population being Roman Catholic, easily 40 percent of the stories that appear in the *Sun Times* and the *Tribune* are Roman Catholic.

There is a tremendous burden on the reporter to try to write, shall we say, pan-issue stories. I think we all fall into these. When you do a story on Protestantism, say mainline Protestantism, for example, you try to touch as many of those denominations that fall within that definition as you possibly can. At the same time, we then spend a fair amount of attention and focus on stories of the major religious group of the area, which is Roman Catholicism. The sheer number of institutions and services that the church as a whole delivers in this area are unavoidable.

That brings us back to the issue of what is news. My definition, the one that I recall from the first day, my first job, in Marquette, Michigan, was that news is something you don't know. It's just that simple. And news is also names. It's generated by names. And, therefore, we pay an inordinate amount of attention to names. I want to specifically respond to Peter's comment on the *New York Times* treatment of the Cardinal Bernardin story. I participated in a similar conference to this one at Northwestern University two weeks ago, sponsored by the Law School and the Journalism School, at which both the legal profession and journalism took their share of lumps for the coverage of that particular story. And in some instances, I think justifiably so. But I would still challenge the editors of the *New York Times*. Substitute the name John Cardinal O'Connor for Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. Would that have been three paragraphs on page twenty-seven? I simply refuse to believe that the *Times* would have treated it the same way.

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Steinfels: There are all sorts of things going on here. There's tremendous antimedia feeling. If we're going to talk about the bashing of religion, Catholic-bashing, Evangelical-bashing, and Fundamentalist-bashing, I think we also have to acknowledge that there's media-bashing, and this creates a certain immunity among media people to fair criticism.

In the wake of the massacre in Hebron which was then followed by the shooting of Hasidic young people on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, the Marble Collegiate Church had a dialogue sermon in which the pastor was joined by a rabbi and an imam. I obtained a tape recording. At one point, one of the clergymen said something about the media's reports of violence. The whole congregation went into cheering and clapping. I thought, now wait a minute. It wasn't reporters who shot at people in Hebron. It wasn't reporters who shot up people on the Brooklyn Bridge. There's a great deal of frustration displaced onto the media about dealing with some of the uncomfortable realities of our lives.

Marin: It is easy to be a biased reporter. It is not so difficult to be a biased viewer or reader. We all hear the bells we hear and we each have a responsibility to try to go beyond that. As I read religious writers in their analyses, what I keep hearing is the word *secular*, the *secular* world, the secular reporter. I thought I understood what secular meant, but in the context in which I was reading, it almost sounded godless. And I'm curious if that is the perception of those who represent religious interests or of religion writers. Does the secular reporter now mean a reporter who is irreligious or disinterested in religion?

Neff: I think that most of the people that I hear use the phrase [secular] that way usually mean godless, a person who doesn't have any kind of religious feeling and commitment. I think you see it used that way. It seems to me it's often used much more of the process of secularization that our society has gone through. And, therefore, that the categories for reporting news tend to be nonreligious, nonspiritual categories, that tend not to touch that major portion of people's lives.

Marin: When we do stories and...I will preface this by saying that many of them are very quick hits, they include tourist attractions like weeping Madonnas, the traffic jams that surround churches where they exist, which is not what I consider to be a religious story. We approach them sometimes on that level. Interwoven in many of our stories is the fact that there's a feeling in the mainstream media that faith is not regarded as a reasonable basis of discussion. But if you look not at the stories about religion, but at a story in which religion is an element, I think your surveys would really be quite different. If you cover the killing of a police officer in Chicago, it is almost inextricably linked with religious observance, the sermon, the music, the pageantry, the respect, the reverence of what his faith brought him, how he served his profession and so forth.

Neff: One thing that is often missed is that newspapers have to do very short stories and the electronic broadcast media generally do the very quickest takes on things. How can we help the reader get inside the religious experience, the religious world view of a particular group? I grew up in a sect which was apocalyptic in its origins and had a lot of that apocalyptic overlay, so that when I saw what was happening in Waco, I could really understand how people could barricade themselves inside a building like that and be willing to die rather than surrender to the ATF. I don't think that there was any reporting that I saw that helped anyone understand the apocalyptic mind set.

Steinfels: You mentioned the amount of time...I am reminded that public broadcasting, Channel 13, the PBS station in New York, is going to embark on broadcasting programs in which there are fifteen hours of discussion about the origins of humanity and humanity's purpose in the cosmos. It is the American version of a program which was made and broadcast originally in the Netherlands where it was a great hit. The series is called "The Glorious Accident," which, in itself, is a kind of metaphysical/religious statement.

All the people on the series are fascinating individuals. They have a variety of views that often conflict in interesting ways. They're all scientists. Now, there is something about the word secular, which can simply mean a kind of neutrality, but I think that it often works in our society to refer to a substantive set of world views and what is proper for discus-

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Carol Marin

I think that most of the people that I hear use the phrase [secular] that way usually mean godless, a person who doesn't have any kind of religious feeling and commitment.

David Neff

When I used the term secular and secular education and a secular newsroom, I was talking specifically about the world view that by my definition is not parochial.

Daniel Lehmann

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sion and what isn't. Why was there no theologian or philosopher from one of the great metaphysical or philosophical traditions?

At the *New York Times* we have postmortems of every issue and somebody wrote an article, in which they included a profile of the subject: where he lives, what kind of a laptop computer he uses, where his last vacation was, the car he drives, and then his religion. In the postmortem this was circled and a correction put in: The *New York Times* does not report people's religions unless it's relevant to the story. Now that's something that has been developed over the years to prevent stereotypical presentations of religion. On the other hand, the little box said that he drove an Alfa Romeo. That wasn't relevant to the story either. There is something then about religion being eliminated from the picture of this major Washington figure. So, this is a really complicated and fascinating question about what secular means and how it operates in the media.

Lehmann: When I used the term secular and secular education and a secular newsroom, I was talking specifically about the world view that by my definition is not parochial. By secular I mean a way that looks at the world as all parts being equal. And each issue in our age of reason is subject to whether it is rational, whether it makes any sense or not.

Marin: I think that's how I use it, too. But we are now in an era where we debate virtually every word we use. I made a list. There are people who object to the use of the words Fundamentalism, Evangelical, cults, sect, religious right, prolife, main-line, mainstream. Secular humanism is not a compliment for many people. As a result, we almost have to define our terms as we walk along; political correctness has gotten us into a terrible bind. Some of it is quite worthwhile. Some of it is just maddening in terms of what you're allowed to say, what you are uncomfortable in expressing for fear of offending or of not getting it exactly right.

John McDermott: [*President, John A. McDermott & Associates, a public policy and urban issues consulting firm*] We're all being too nice, so let me invoke the spirit of Saul Alinsky, a great Chicagoan, and say I think it's time to open the sores of discontent. Many religious people in this town feel there's a cultural war going on in the United States, a real battle over the future and makeup of society and the quality of our country. And they're angry at the media. They're angry at you because they think most of the time your coverage is hostile. When you report on the cultural war, you talk about Pat Buchanan and the religious right. Most of the religious people I know think they're on the defensive, that the aggression is coming from the left, from the very militant secularist movement, which sees religion as purely a matter of personal and private opinion. This defines the world view in which religion really isn't necessary, therefore religious figures and institutions who seem to be asserting certain common values or certain moral principles, are regarded by this mind-set as inappropriate. Richard John Neuhaus calls the result the naked public square. And if you look at our life, it does seem to me, at least, that most of the action, most of the aggression, the pressure, is coming from the left.

We just saw the end of the Good Friday holiday in Illinois public schools after fifty-three years of undemonstrated harm. We've seen the removal of religion, basically, from high school textbooks. Even the idea of voluntary prayer by students is now under attack by a strong national movement. Religious groups of students who wanted to use the school facilities, as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts do, had to go to court to get that upheld. The whole moral tradition of the West in the form of the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition, vis-à-vis sexuality, has been basically banned from public education. So that kids can be given condoms but they can't hear about the Ten Commandments. This is what a lot of people see: a militant, secularist movement determined to drive religion out of any expression in public life. And they accuse you—the media—of not covering it neutrally, but joining sides. When you report the culture war, when you report these issues, you record that aggression is coming from the right, the pressure is from the religious right who want to create a more conformist America, and you neglect the story of the left.

How do you plead?

Many religious people in this town feel there's a cultural war going on in the United States, a real battle over the future and makeup of society and the quality of our country. And they're angry at the media. They're angry at you because they think most of the time your coverage is hostile.

John McDermott

Lehmann: Let's take the Good Friday story. A suit was filed in federal court, I believe in March 1993, by a Chicago school teacher, who was joined by the American Jewish Congress, in challenging a part of the state's school code that dates from 1941. It mandated that all public schools in the state must observe Good Friday, along with Casimir Pulaski Day, Columbus Day, going down the line. Judge Ann Claire Williams, by no means a liberal jurist, a graduate of the University of Notre Dame Law School, examined this and applied the Supreme Court's twenty-year-old Lemon test, and found that it violated at least two of those points. Therefore, she chucked the mandated holiday by ordering a preliminary injunction proscribing its enforcement throughout the state. It will likely be appealed by the

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state attorney general's office.

In writing that story, I contacted what I thought was a nice broad spectrum of opinion. I contacted the National Association of Evangelicals, the Christian Coalition of Illinois, a priest of the Episcopal Church, as well as lawyers of different stripes. So you've got an amalgam of opinions. The only two who spoke out as I heard you, John, talking about fifty-three years of no harm, the only persons who objected were predictable, conservative elements within the National Association of Evangelicals and the Christian Coalition. Without exception, the rest of the opinion was based on our understanding of our culture today with its proliferation of pluralism, by no means monotheistic in tradition any longer. It's amazing that that particular statute, part of the school code, lasted as long as it did, that it wasn't challenged earlier. If that makes the reporter part of the assault on those traditional values, then I would plead guilty.

McDermott: Let me respond. I don't think I'm talking about one story. Although it would be fair to say that filing this suit was not a happenstance event, it was organized by the American Jewish Congress. If you look at the ACLU, and similar groups' programs, you'll see tax exemption is next on the list, a challenging of the tax exemption of churches and church-related institutions across the country. I guess my point is if you don't cover that, you don't look at the war that's taking place; you've covered this simply as an event. I don't think the coverage of the Good Friday decision took into account the recent surveys which show that 85 percent of Americans define themselves as Christian in one way or the other. If it is reasonable to close schools, let us say, in Glencoe and Highland Park on Jewish holidays to accommodate the majority—in this era of multiculturalism, it can be an occasion to teach gentile kids respect and understanding of their Jewish neighbors—I don't see why it doesn't work the other way. Isn't it a reasonable accommodation for the majority who have respect for Good Friday to use the occasion in a positive way? You, in the media, do not cover that dimension of the story.

Roy Larson: [*Retired religion editor of the* Chicago Sun-Times, *now director, Center for Religion in the News Media, Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University*] In 1973 I went to a church as a visitor, just dropped in at the 11 o'clock service. It was the week before the Episcopal convention meeting in Louisville. That was expected to be a controversial event. During the service when announcements were being given, the priest said, "Now we're going to have a convention this week, it's going to be in Louisville. Don't believe what you're going to read in the press about that convention. If you have any questions, call me and we'll set you right."

The priest did not know I was in the congregation that morning and expected to cover that convention. I walked out of the church, went down to the corner drug store, bought a legal pad and a pen, and wrote him a note. I went back to the church and handed it to the usher and I said, "Will you please give this to Father after the service is over." Half an hour after I got home that day, the priest came to the house, his tail dragging, and full of apologies and he's been apologizing ever since.

The reason I bring this up is this: All my life, ordained and unordained, I thought of myself as a minister of the word. In this era of cheap media bashing (and that doesn't apply to what John just said), which is what the priest had been doing, I don't believe that people within the church appreciate the vocational discernment and the vocational integrity of many of the people working in journalism. In all my years of journalism, I would say that the commitment to truth, the commitment to working professionally in the true vocational sense, the journalists I worked with, most of them, were secular monks, in many ways, with as strong a sense of discipline as any priest that I ever knew.

Steinfels: To pick up from both Roy's and Carol's remarks about the truth: I think that's what motivates me and it motivates a lot of the people I work with. Sometimes it means reporting very uncomfortable things about a group to which one feels great loyalty. You have to be convinced that it's better to know the truth than not to know the truth.

One of the problems with what might be identified as the religious left is that as a reporter you're not very confident about how many of the grand statements about world issues are backed up anymore by conviction and emotion in the pews.

Peter Steinfels

There were certain things in the series about the Catholic Church in the United States [*New York Times*, May 29-June 1,1994], the results of this poll that we took, that absolutely startled me. I had mixed feelings about reporting them. I say to myself, on the one hand, this finding that a large percentage of American Catholics may no longer hold anything approaching a traditional view of the Eucharist, this could be an alarm bell for people who might want to start educating a bit more intensely.

On the other hand, it could set a new standard. A lot more people would say, well, that's what we believe, I guess that's what majority rule is. So, in the end, that was the finding and I didn't know what would be the consequences, good or bad. I just thought it was important that we had framed the question carefully and then we reported it and there was a little uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach when I wrote about it.

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In terms of the earlier point about the way that the religious, cultural wars are reported, or the religious right is reported, I think I would agree with a good deal of what John McDermott said. When I read the headline saying "Religious Right Gains Influence and Spreads Discord in GOP," I was thinking, you know, why doesn't it say "...and Brings New Life to GOP"? We have defined the religious right as a problem in that story, rather than in neutral terms.

Frank Butler: I'm with FADICA [Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities] My question deals with part of the Dart/Allen study which talked about the rift, if you will, or lack of trust, between clergy and journalists. To what extent is the religious coverage problem one of accessibility, information, cooperation within the religious community itself?

Lehmann: Well, I'll try that one by asking Bishop Imesch over here why he didn't return the phone calls that I made to him over the years? [laughter]

Joseph Imesch: [*Bishop of Joliet, Illinois*] I just want you to know, if there's one thing I do, it is return phone calls. So if you called me, you got a response, but you were out.

Lehmann: I've been out for a long time.

Kevin Clarke: I'm from *Salt* Magazine. Why is it so difficult for the religious left to get much of its message, which is simultaneously critical and hopeful about American society, out through the mainstream press?

Steinfels: In terms of the religious left, I'm not quite sure what that means anymore. I get immense amounts of material from every point of the religious spectrum, right, left, and center: press releases, invitations to cover things, and so on. One of the problems with what might be identified as the religious left is that as a reporter you're not very confident about how many of the grand statements about world issues are backed up anymore by conviction and emotion in the pews. It's been proven by the so-called religious right that they can mobilize large numbers of people. I don't want to go too far, but there's certainly segments of the religious left who seem to have lost contact with people in the pews. And therefore their pronouncements, not necessarily those cases where they're really engaged in action, but their pronouncements about world problems, I really can't convince the desk that these are things that they want to give space to. That's one difficulty.

The other difficulty is that—and this is only a difficulty for me as a religion writer—the religious left seems to me to have become habitually nervous or uncomfortable with stating its concerns in explicitly religious language. So, oftentimes, perfectly good concerns about hunger or world problems coming out of the religious left sound almost identical to the expressions that would come from nonreligious groups. Now, that doesn't mean they're any more or less reportable. But it certainly means that they're clearly not a religion story for *me* to report. Sometimes I'm puzzled by what's happened to the explicit religious dimension, which I suspect is there in people's lives, but some kind of self-censorship seems to have removed the articulation of what they're doing.

Neff: I got a call recently that again showed this proverbial ignorance on the part of a reporter about religion, but one that I really welcomed, because for once it was exactly the right question. It was a real-estate writer, who had been investigating the community development going on at the Lawndale community here in Chicago. And he had come to see that there was a strong religious dimension to what was going on. And he specifically named one individual who had moved from North Barrington, where he had a very large house, huge income and moved into what was a dangerous and economically precarious community. And the reporter said to me, "I have two questions. Do Christians do this very often?" [laughter] And, I had to say, well, not as often as I'd like, but there are others who have made this kind of sacrifice. His next question was, "Why would a Christian give up everything to do something like this?" And I was able to give him a very theological answer. I was grateful for his ignorance.

Martin Marty: Today, the voluntary association is the religion story. If you want to talk about voluntary associational life in America, 80 percent of it is being done by the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities and Bread for the World and so on. Robert Wuthnow's book *On Acts of Compassion*, notes that 56 percent of adult Americans volunteer for something every week, but that 70 or 80 percent of them do it through religion. I'd like to see the press notice that more. The voluntary associational life of religion is the biggest, single, undercovered story. That story isn't known; and without it, I think, the soul of America would be lost. □

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WASHINGTON

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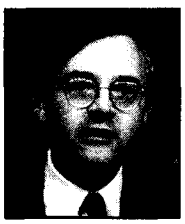
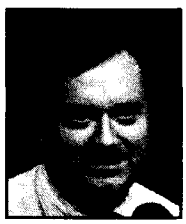


E. J. Dionne, Jr.
Washington Post



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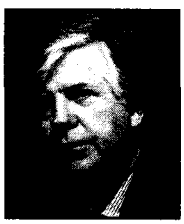

John Dart
Los Angeles Times

Cokie Roberts
ABC News

Terry Eastland
Forbes
MediaCritic

Helen Alvare
United States
Catholic Conference

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

E.J. Dionne, Jr.

Forums like this—where journalists raise questions about what they do, sometimes engaging in that medieval practice of self-flagellation—have become so common that one begins to worry that journalism itself is going through its own crisis of faith, certainly questioning its infallibility. There's a danger, I think, of a lot of self-importance in these forums as if journalism itself were the center of the world. Graham Greene in his story "The Third Man" comments that we never get accustomed to being less important to other people than they are to us. And I often think that journalists think that we are far more important to the proper running of the universe than we actually are, and assume that the whole world is interested in what we do; that they are as interested as we are ourselves. And our able critics actually may reinforce this hubris.

So before I say anything else, I want to make clear that I don't think that journalism is the alpha and the omega. Nor do I think that journalists are capable of bringing down the world's religious institutions or of endangering the faith. Understanding the limits of journalism, I think might be the first step toward understanding it better. On the other hand, I don't want to underestimate the depth of feeling, often hostile, that religious people feel toward the media.

I'd like to try to do two things today: First, I want to reflect a bit on my own experiences covering religion, especially the time I spent covering the pope and the Vatican. And secondly, I'd like to tack a few theses about religion and the press up on the wall. And I would like to lay out a few guidelines that we could argue about on what can and can not be expected, reasonably, from the press in its coverage of religion.

My favorite story in the entire time I was covering the Vatican took place in a town called Beminda, up country in Cameroon, during one of the pope's visits to Africa. The press had flown in ahead of the pope. We arrived in a pouring rain. It had been raining, I was told, for six days. We had some time before the pope got there, so I started talking to people from the area. And I fell into a long conversation with a bright young man who was a practicing Catholic and a representative of the provincial information ministry. He assured me during this downpour, that it would not rain on the pope. And I asked him, "How do you know this?" And he replied, "Because the rain doctors told me."

Now this story would prove to be an excellent vignette for a story I was working on about the relationship between Catholicism and traditional African beliefs. I convinced the *New York Times* Week in Review that a section of the paper that had taken all manner of ideas and religions seriously, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Marxism, liberalism, and all kinds of other ideas, ought to give animism a fair shot. But, of course, the story gets better and I bet you know how it turns out.

In the fullness of time, the pope's plane landed and the crowds cheered. The door opened up and suddenly it stopped raining. The pope got out and began saying Mass. And in the middle of the Mass the sun came out and shone on the pope at the altar. The Mass ended and the pope got some more cheers. He got back on the plane and the heavens opened and it started pouring. Now the young man who had told me about the rain doctor spotted me on the press platform, and he didn't care that he was getting soaked, he came running up to me with a big smile on his face, pointing to the heavens and saying, "See, see, I told you so." The story I wrote began with the lead, "It was not clear who had done the work, but someone was clearly on the job."

In talking to journalism students I tell this story and ask them to consider what their assumptions are in coming to stories about spirituality and religion. Their working assumption, no doubt, would be that all this was simply a wonderful coincidence. The rain doctors couldn't possibly know anything about whether or not it would rain on the pope. But I would always ask them, "How do you know that for

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certain?" If a journalist is supposed to be a Joe Friday, just-the-facts-ma'am enterprise, the facts in that story do not necessarily point to the conclusion that this was the merest coincidence. Should not a fair-minded journalist leave his or her mind open to at least the possibility that the rain doctors know something we don't? Or perhaps that the pope was particularly blessed that day? Now I don't challenge the idea that coincidence is one possible explanation for what went on. I have no idea what the rain doctors' track record is over the long haul, or whether it's any better than that of secular meteorologists. But I do think that it is fundamentally opposed to the common assumptions that journalists say they hold to, to take this set of facts and rule out by fiat the possibility that something rather special just might have been going on.

A second story I like to remember concerns the problems involved in how the language we use in journalism colors everything we write and everything we do. And this involved writing what, on its face, should be the simplest of news stories, which was basically a piece about the pageantry of the pope celebrating Easter Sunday Mass. Late one Easter Sunday night, after I had covered the pope's Mass, I was staring at my computer screen facing what ought to have been a simple question, which is how do you describe Easter in a secular newspaper? If you say Easter, the day on which Christians claim Jesus rose from the dead, you make it sound like a lie. If you say, Easter, the day on which Christians allege Jesus rose from the dead, you make it sound like a crime. So I finally settled on, Easter, the day Christians revere as marking Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which may also be loaded, but I thought it was reasonably accurate. I might have done better to use the word believe. But I think which ever formulation is right, I think that journalistic constructions tell us a lot about how we actually feel about believers.

The issue here is not the one that concerns journalists actually more than it should, which is whom will we offend; rather, it goes to the more fundamental issue of fairness. Do we have any understanding at all of the beliefs of hundreds of millions of people? Are we conveying in the words we use in situations like that, hidden and often biased assumptions about what we think of those people?

A third episode is revealing about what we journalists look for when we cover stories. This also involved the pope's trip to Africa with a series of speeches in three different countries. It was like covering a presidential campaign in October, a few days before the election. He was touching down everywhere. We were handed a big packet at the beginning of the day, and having read through it, one of my colleagues, one of the best Vatican correspondents, looked up with alarm and said, "What are we going to write about? There's nothing but religion here."

Now he understood perfectly the irony of what he was saying, but his comments did raise some interesting questions about what journalists look for when they come to religion. If the pope can't speak about religion, after all, who can? If the pope speaks about politics, it's a good story. If he speaks about sex, it's a great story. A friend with one of the wire services once said that any story she wrote with the words "pope" and "sex" in the lead were guaranteed to be used in every paper all across America.

That day it seemed we had neither sex nor politics to help us get into the newspapers. But, as you can tell, I like stories that get better and this one does too. Another colleague and I approached the Vatican spokesman and asked him to make sense of these speeches. Did he see any common themes that we might have missed? Now the spokesman, a very shrewd man, understood exactly what we needed. He argued that if you read the speeches very carefully, you could see that the pope was offering the leaders of these various African countries—this was his quote, "An implicit pact, that if they respected human rights and religious freedom, the Vatican was prepared to do all it could to plead their case to the world for relief from poverty." Now the pope never used those words "implicit pact," but it sounded like a wonderful idea to us.

Frank Greer, James Carvel, and Roger Ailes clearly have nothing on the Vatican spokesman. My friend and I left this conversation with big smiles on our faces. The words "implicit pact" appeared in the leads of both of our stories and my friend's story actually made it to page one of the *Los Angeles Times*. Who said there was no politics that day?

There are, I think, many lessons here. The first is that my friend was right. There really is "no news" most of the time in standard religious declarations. That is to say, we assume there is no news. Why should it be news that the pope should

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Four Theses

I. There really is a fundamental conflict between the definition of truth used by journalists and the definition accepted by people of religious faith.

II. Secular people, including journalists, need to accept that religious belief is usually built upon an intellectually serious foundation.

III. Whatever the religious proclivities of journalists, contemporary journalism needs to question whether it is confining the coverage of religion to a ghetto.

IV. The churches cannot expect deference from the press, especially on those occasions when they choose, as they must, to intervene in secular, political controversies.

E. J. Dionne, Jr.

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talk about Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and salvation? The Good News isn't, by any conventional sense, news. The other lesson is that religious institutions really are, in their way, thoroughly worldly and understand the imperatives in the world they are dealing with. Certainly our friend, the Vatican spokesman, did. He was not going to be naive enough to pretend that we'd write about standard religious themes and that those stories would make page one. So he figured out the best way to get his message across, and it worked, proving that even the Good News is subject to spin.

The last story I want to tell concerns the devil. One day I opened up my morning newspaper in Rome and discovered that the Archdiocese of Turin had named a panel of exorcists. The Italian press had great fun with this story and ran it under headlines like "Does the Devil Live in Turin?" I thought it was very important to find out and I'd never been to Turin, so I went. Two encounters were of particular interest.

The first was with a priest who was handling the press on this story. A lot of us had come to Turin to look for Satan. This priest was enraged at all the attention this story had received. He was from Turin and was upset that his city, with its reputation for rationality and efficiency, had come to be seen as a place of superstition and Satanism. The truth, he said, was that the Vatican had sent out a circular all through Italy. There had been a rise of satanic cults and the Vatican wanted every diocese to deal with this. They wanted to make

sure that exorcists were on the job. The priest argued that because Turin was the most efficient and well-organized of Italian cities, the archdiocese had been the very first to name exorcists, and that's why they had gotten all this terrible publicity. And he said, mournfully, that as a result of its efficiency, the archdiocese had become the laughing-stock of the country. He was not pleased and so it should never be said that churches are indifferent to the judgment or logic of the secular world.

After that, I went off to a town in the mountains outside Turin to interview a priest who had long experience as an exorcist. I got there just as he was about to begin afternoon Mass, so I went to Mass and then interviewed him. He was in his seventies and was a very interesting man. He had been a worker priest in the factories of Turin and clearly had very progressive political views. Greed, he said, was the clearest sign of Satan's presence in the world. He had seen that every day, he said, when he was working in the factories. And then he described his various exorcisms, calmly, clearly, in very precise detail. He deeply believed he had encountered Satan, and while I'm not big on Satan myself, it was impossible to doubt that this man's description of what he had encountered was entirely honest.

To this day, I don't know what to make of our conversation, except that I am sure I was in the presence of a very honest and very rational man. I quoted him in my story respectfully, but I'm not sure my readers had any better understanding than I did of what he was saying. But I couldn't resist at the end of the story, quoting a Vatican official citing C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* in which Satan tells his nephew, and I quote roughly, "All we have to do is to get them to believe we don't exist and then we've won." I figured that would provoke a few conversations around breakfast tables.

I particularly like that story because I think it goes to the heart of the problem of the confrontation between contemporary religion and secular journalism. One thesis I'd like to tack up: There really is a fundamental conflict between the definition of truth used by journalists and the definition accepted by people of religious faith.

People of faith believe what they believe because they believe it's true. Christians believe that Jesus is God and rose from the dead. Muslims believe that there is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet. Jews believe that there is one God who handed Moses the Commandments on the mountaintop. Christians, Jews, and Muslims affected by the modern world may seek to rationalize or water down these beliefs, but for the devout, they are quite simply true.

Contemporary American journalism, on the other hand, is the quintessentially Enlightenment profession. Saint Thomas the Apostle, doubting Thomas, could be our patron saint. Our rules say, prove it. Show me. Give me the evidence. Where are the documents? Do you have two sources on the Virgin Birth? Why should we believe these guys who said they saw Jesus after he died, the journalist might ask. Where are the pictures? How do we know that the Ten Commandments came from God? Maybe the journalist might say they were written the way party platforms are written, and the guys who wrote them figured out the best way to sell them was to assert that God endorses the Ten Commandments.

I joke here, but I do think this is a serious problem and a serious source of misunderstanding between journalists and people of faith, precisely because religious people are profoundly convinced that what they believe is true. The basic

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skepticism of the journalistic craft strikes them—not unreasonably, from their point of view—as wrong and even ungodly. There is no simple solution to this problem. Religious people living in a free society cannot expect others to accept on faith that all they believe is true. A certain skepticism is an inescapable, and in most ways healthy, aspect of the modern journalist's mind. But believers do deserve to be treated without bigotry.

And so as a second thesis, I would suggest that secular people, including journalists, need to accept that religious belief is usually built upon an intellectually serious foundation. It is simply misinformed, bad reporting, if you will, to assume that religious faith is nothing but prejudice or superstition. There is a temptation on the part of some in my profession to believe that. Protestant fundamentalism, for example, has gotten a very bad press throughout this century. Protestant fundamentalism has had rigorous intellectual defenders, who came to their views as a result of a serious confrontation with modernity. The emphasis on biblical inerrancy, so puzzling to secular people, and even to nonfundamentalist Christians, was, in part, the result of a rational search for a form of authority strong enough to resist encroachments by liberal and modern ideas on traditional doctrine. One need not accept biblical inerrancy to understand how and why others do accept it. To refuse even to enter temporarily into the world of the religious believer reflects a lack of religious imagination that should be foreign to a journalist trying to do his or her job right.

Much has been made of the conflicting studies of the religious views of journalists. My own personal experience is that reporters are somewhat more religious than the Rothman study would suggest. But there may be less conflict in these contradictory findings than one might think. I have no doubt that the survey cited by Dart and Allen is right in reporting the strong religious inclinations of reporters who cover religion. And I have no doubt that Lichter and Rothman are broadly speaking right in seeing journalists as a whole as being less religious than other groups in the country. These are, I think, interesting questions, but I'm not sure that they are, in any way, decisive.

The real issue, I think, is not the precise figures on the religious inclination of journalists, but rather the way journalists, religious and nonreligious alike, regard religious news itself. Lots of journalists don't know how to cook very well, but they understand the importance of having recipes in their newspapers. Some journalists know a lot more about sports than other journalists, and Tim Russert knows more about the Buffalo Bills than anybody, yet I know of not a single journalist who would question the importance of having a sports section.

Thus, a third thesis I'd like to tack up, which is that whatever the religious proclivities of journalists, contemporary journalism needs to question whether it is confining the coverage of religion to a ghetto. In many ways, I think this is a more important issue than bias against religion in those stories that actually do appear. For tens of millions of Americans, and literally billions around the world, religion is a central fact of life. For many, it is more important than politics and, amazingly, more important than sports. For a lot of people, it's more important than sex. Yet religion is often covered most when it is an adjunct to something else, especially, as I said, politics and sex. As far as I know, neither the Vatican nor the Christian Coalition has fielded a sports team. This is the issue my friend covering the pope was getting at when he said, tongue-in-cheek, there was nothing but religion in that particular packet of papal speeches.

Religious people...cannot and should not want the media to exempt church leaders from criticism for the sorts of failures that are routinely criticized and brought to light in other human institutions. There is a flip side to this: that the media should not assume that certain outrages are automatically worse when they are perpetrated by people in religious institutions.

E. J. Dionne, Jr.

I suggest that the most important goal for those seeking fairer coverage of religion is the same as the goal George Meany set for the trade union movement—*more.* As Dart and Allen point out in their study, fewer than seventy journalists in the entire country cover religion full time. As Peter Steinfels noted in an earlier session in Chicago, being a religion reporter, even in a paper that takes religion seriously, is like being a one-man sports department. It's like being required to cover baseball, basketball, football, hockey, soccer, tennis, polo, track, gymnastics, wrestling, and lacrosse, and to be terrible knowledgeable about every single one. Try moving from Jews to Muslims to Catholics to Unitarians, Buddhists, Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians, Mormons, Hindus, and to be expected on a day-to-day basis to be expert in each of these faiths. Now no one expects a sudden explosion in employment for religion reporters. Probably not an explosion in any sort of employment in our profession. And no one expects a massive increase in the amount of space that newspapers, television stations, or networks devote to religion.

Yet, I do think, where religion is treated as a serious subject that provokes wide interest, the coverage is demonstrably better. The news magazines, for example, particularly *Time* and *Newsweek*, have given religion extensive coverage over many, many years. Judging from the outside as a reader looking at space allocations, layout, magazine covers, and the

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like, religious subjects are treated comprehensively, critically, and fairly, and on, at least, something approaching equality with other subjects.

But it must be said that the churches themselves may actually discourage, rather than encourage, more extensive coverage and treatment of religious subjects. They do this unintentionally when they take offense, not simply at generally unfair coverage, but also at quite normal, less than favorable coverage.

Thus another thesis. The churches cannot expect deference from the press, especially on those occasions when they choose, as they must, to intervene in secular, political controversies. Churches will get whacked from the left when they take a stand against abortion. They will get whacked from the right when they oppose the death penalty or economic injustice. The churches have every right to argue that their entry into these debates is legitimate. But those that call themselves religious do need to exercise some care in the kinds of assertions they make in the secular realm. When religious people make assertions in a dogmatic way about secular political issues, there is a great danger. They need to demonstrate a much clearer link than is often made about why such and such a subject, a secular subject, needs to be spoken of by religious leaders.

Religious people, I think, also need to accept that while faith is sublime, religious institutions are run by human beings, with human ambitions and human flaws. As the novelist James Carroll put it, referring to his own church in an essay for the *Nieman Reports*, "To Catholics who want to return to the idea of a church mystically exempt from the human condition, the reporting of a simple truth about church affairs can be an affront. But the Catholics who glory in the humanism of the church, understand that its limits and its sins, like their own, can be forgiven. For them, truthful and aggressive reporting of church affairs broadly defined, is not only welcome, but also essential."

Religious people, I think, cannot and should not want the media to exempt church leaders from criticism for the sorts of failures that are routinely criticized and brought to light in other human institutions. There is a flip side to this: that the media should not assume that certain outrages are automatically worse when they are perpetrated by people in religious institutions. It's true that religious leaders should hold themselves to the highest standards, since they preach those standards to the rest of us. Speaking as an individual and not as a journalist, I expect a bit more from people who are nuns and priests and ministers and rabbis. But as journalists, we have to be consistent. If we rightly ask religious people to understand why we treat the churches as human institutions, we should not suddenly raise the standards we apply to them to divine levels when it suits our purposes. We should not automatically believe any charge brought against any cleric or religious person—a lesson that we should draw from what was the terrible treatment of Cardinal Bernadin, who was subject to entirely false accusations.

I'd like to close by reading an excerpt from a forthcoming book by the late Christopher Lasch, who I believe lays out a constructive and ultimately very wise approach to religion that might inform us all as journalists, but also as human beings.

"Opponents of religion," Lasch wrote, "argue that it necessarily fosters intolerance, since those who embrace it imagine themselves to be in possession of absolute exclusive truths, irreconcilable with other truth claims....Cultured despisers of religion suspect that religious tolerance, in short, is a contradiction in terms, a fact seemingly borne out by the long history of religious warfare." But, he goes on, "Instead of discouraging moral inquiry, religious prompting can just as easily stimulate it by calling attention to the dysfunction between verbal profession and practice, by insisting that a profound observation of prescribed rituals is not enough to ensure salvation, and by encouraging believers at every step to question their own motives."

He concludes, "Far from putting doubts and anxieties to rest, religion often has the effect of intensifying them. It judges those who profess the faith more harshly than it judges unbelievers....If it is ultimately forgiving of human weakness and folly, it is not because it ignores them or attributes them exclusively to unbelievers. For those who take religion seriously, belief is a burden, not a self-righteous claim to some privileged moral status. Self-righteousness, indeed, may well be more prevalent among skeptics than among believers. The spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion. Because a secular society does not grasp the need for such a discipline, it misunderstands the nature of religion to console, but first of all, to challenge and to confront."

To console, but also and above all, to challenge and confront. I think that is not only a good definition of religion's role and purpose in our lives, but I also think it's a very good definition of the journalist's task. And so, I'd like to suggest that in the end perhaps journalism and religion have much more in common than any of us might realize.

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DISCUSSION

Tim Russert: Thank you E.J. I'm in my third year as moderator of "Meet the Press." I learned early on, be very careful when you try to insert religion into a program. E.J. Dionne mentioned my passion for the Buffalo Bills. I was able to convince my employers at NBC that it was in their interest for me to bring "Meet the Press" to the Super Bowl the day the Buffalo Bills were playing the Dallas Cowboys. At the end of all the interviews, the director said in my ear, you have fifteen seconds to fill. So I looked in the camera and said, "Well, now it's in God's hands and God is good and God is just. Please God, one time, go Bills." As I walked off the set, my colleague, Tom Brokaw, said, "You can't pray on the air." [laughter] And I said, "I just did." [laughter] He said, "You Irish Catholics are shameless." I said, "You'll see, Brokaw." And so after the Cowboys squeaked by, 52 to 17, I moped back to the hotel and there at the corner bar was Brokaw, and he said, "Well, I guess God's a Southern Baptist." [laughter]

I'll begin with John Dart.

John Dart: With the number of references that were made to "Bridging the Gap," I want to give a brief summary. It was done in 1992-93 at Vanderbilt, while Jimmy Allen and I were visiting professional scholars there. It was based on a survey, first, of Catholic and Protestant clergy and religion writers and newspaper editors; second, on an extensive review of scholarly studies and periodical literature on the subject; third, on more than fifty interviews with representative people in journalism and religion; and, fourth, on our own experiences.

The findings and conclusions: a high percentage of clergy felt that religion news is biased and unfairly negative, while newspaper editors and religion news specialists strongly deny such is the case. The percentage of clergy who were unhappy was high, even those who identify themselves as mainline clergy.

We [Dart/Allen Report] feel that religion news suffers from too many mistakes and mischaracterizations, and too many pertinent religious elements in stories are missed or avoided. Religion often, though not always, is a weak spot in the overall news package presented to most viewers and readers. We feel that the weaknesses stem not from overt bias, but primarily from a lack of knowledge of the subject, a deficiency that handicaps most news people from doing a fully professional job. If there are professionals on this beat, they will do a decent job. When bias does show up, it's most likely to be on public, perhaps clerical issues, writs by religious bodies.

Another finding is contrary to a common assumption in churches and religious circles: that the news media coverage is bad because of widespread unbelief. We feel that the premise is vastly overstated. The Lichter/Rothman report in 1980 was only of journalists, about 250 in New York and Washington, with the major broadcast and print outfits. I think that was true, as far as it went, but it is often misquoted as representing journalists nationwide. Our survey was nationwide. Newspaper editors in our survey, 35 percent or so, said religion was very important to them. A similar survey, done about the same time, of all kinds of journalists, came up with just about the same figure, and another 35 percent in both surveys said religion was somewhat important.

When they're asked, 75 percent of religion writers said religion was "very important" to them. Contrast that to the public response of "very important," around 60 percent usually in Gallup polls. I agree with E.J. Dionne that that is not the issue, but sometimes that's seen as the issue: "Well, they're not religious—no wonder we don't get good coverage." It's really the lack of resources, of expertise you can call upon to help cover a difficult subject. And there are too few religion specialists. I'm one of two on our paper [*Los Angeles Times*], but there are only about three newspapers in the country, maybe four, that have two full-time religion writers.

In general, our recommendations were that organized religion needs more media savvy and news media need more expertise and familiarity with religion.

I'd like to go quickly over what's happened since this report was released in September 1993. There were a large number of conferences and reports and articles about the subject, inspired not simply by "Bridging the Gap." The *Nieman Reports* had a summary issue on "God and the Newsroom," the Society of Professional Journalists' *Quill Magazine* had a story on religion and the news, *Editor and Publisher* had a number of articles from different contributors over the last twelve months on this subject. *TV Guide* had a cover story, "Is God Snubbed by TV News?" That article, in fact, was occasioned by ABC "World News Tonight" with Peter Jennings, hiring Peggy Wehmeyer as the first full-time network television reporter to cover religion.

CNN, by the way, began running a ten-minute segment on religion news each Thursday morning, starting in November [1993], usually a live interview. I don't think they had anything on a regular basis before. In our report, which came out a year before, we say that Peggy Wehmeyer was the only local TV reporter covering religion, that was at a station in Dallas. Since then, I've learned that CBS affiliate stations in Salt Lake City, Tulsa, and Huntsville, Alabama, have religion reporters who spend more than half their time on that beat. In addition, Michele Beardon, an excellent religion writer, returned to religion reporting at a new job at the *Tampa Tribune*. She also does a weekly news report on the NBC affiliate there, primarily because the paper and TV station are both owned by Media General. There's been an attempt to start the Center for Religion and the News Media cosponsored by Medill School of Journalism and Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary at Northwestern.

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Religion News Service, which has been a nonprofit struggling entity for decades, was purchased by Newhouse News Service and moved recently to Washington, D.C., and shows signs of being a major player in getting good quality stories to its existing 50 secular and 150 religious clients. The *Dallas Morning News* has a project to start a weekly section. The First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt had backed them in that. After surveying the community on the needs and so forth, it may become a model type weekly issue—and not a ghetto on Saturday—but a high-profile section in a town where the religion writer says there can be traffic jams on Sunday mornings in Dallas.

I've written a primer on the "God Beat," for people new to the religion beat, which will be released by the First Amendment Center. I have another grant to do a huge glossary on religion and its terminology. The aim here is to provide something handy, answer the editor's questions: Give me a short phrase for the Pentecostal movement or something of that nature. Well, we'll give them several short phrases [laughter]. Going to the encyclopedia can be daunting, because you get a full history and so forth and you don't know currently what terms can be used. We'll also provide terms that you should not use, little caution signs maybe. Anyway, this is following up my very strong feeling that it's a matter of unfamiliarity. There is fear of religion in the newsroom because journalists don't want to make mistakes if they're good journalists. And rather than make a mistake, they write around the subject or the point.

On the religion side, you not only need more attention to public relation efforts, especially at the regional level, but also—contrary to people who are familiar with *Commonweal* or some excellent pieces in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and some thoughtful writing about religion—throughout the country I see religion not expressing itself in very compelling, articulate, sophisticated ways. I see a lot of very doctrinaire things being said. You have to convince journalists that there is news and that there are people out there who are thoughtful and convincing. If religion wants to be covered as a serious news subject, it can't get by with pat answers.

Russert: Thank you, John. When the writer of that *TV Guide* article actually called me up, he said, "I'd like to talk to you about an article I'm working on. I've been told by several people that, well, that you're a practicing Catholic." Oh, my God, I said, I've been outed [laughter]. I said, "Well, what's the thesis of your article? Where are you headed with this?" He said [laughter], "Well, last Easter Sunday you concluded the program by saying, quote, 'The sun is shining, the cherry blossoms are out, Christ has risen, Allah is coming, and tomorrow the Baltimore Orioles open their home season. Have a great day.'" I said yes, I did say all that. I thought it was rather nondenominational and secular, but nonetheless, it was evidence of my religion.

I have talked about this subject with Cokie Roberts several times, how people who are visible because of television, there's an assumption made, therefore, particularly if they have a Democratic pedigree, that somehow we are either nonreligious or perhaps even atheists and how could you be anything else if you are so smart and visible and articulate on national television? Well, Cokie Roberts is all those things, but she's also a co-religionist.

Cokie Roberts: Thank you. I actually do go straight from the Brinkley show to Mass on the theory that I have a lot to atone for. But I want you to know I don't get there until after the sermon so that I don't have any occasion of sin [laughter].

Talking about reporters being careful: I covered John Paul II when he came to the United States for the first time in 1979. He had a huge Mass on Boston Common, and the rain doc-

tor was not there. It poured. I was doing pieces for National Public Radio. All of my colleagues with names like O'Hara and Gibbons and Murphy and McCarthy went to the telephone and said, "The pope began...." They had written their scripts, of course, before the Mass had begun, which was a good thing, because before the days of traveling computers, we were doing this in handwriting and in the rain our scripts were all running down the page. I kept hearing people saying, "the pope began with the ancient words, '*Introibo ad altare Dei.*'" I finally told them that Catholics haven't started the Mass with those words since 1969, which is when those fellows had last been—an example of what we're talking about here.

But things are getting better and part of the reason they are is because of forums like this and because of people like E.J. and Tim and me inside of our own newsrooms, saying you cannot have Fay Wattleton against Randall Terry. It's just not right. So finally, the church got smart and got Helen Alvare as a spokesperson, which is the best thing that has happened to the Catholic Church in a very long time.

But the other thing that is very hard, is trying to make this stuff intelligible for broadcasting. During the synod, the bish-

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ops would all go into that ugly, new building at the Vatican and talk in Latin. Then they'd come out and they'd endlessly read these interdictions and stuff. It just went on and on and on. One day, a friend and fellow journalist was visiting—he had dropped down from the summit in Geneva—and they were reading this statement from the morning session which said that the patriarch of Antioch got up and said, "In this millennium, the church has been looking West. In the last millennium, the church looked East." And my colleague turns to me and says, "Is this today's story?" So, it is a problem to translate, literally and figuratively.

In looking at John Dart's data about how people who are religious by trade see the media versus how people in the media see it, I must say, it is exactly the same as the way any other trade sees the media. I am serving on a panel very similar to this Friday morning at Brookings about Congress and the media. And the data are exactly the same. The people inside the media think we are, by and large, being fair and balanced and just telling the facts as they are, ma'am. And the people—who are in the, whatever the trade is or profession, in rare cases—are convinced that we are all out to get them, a bunch of biased, awful people who always get it wrong. There is truth to both sides, but part of the problem, as E.J. has so nicely said, is the nature of journalism.

It is our nature, as journalists, to be skeptics, to be questioning, and to deal with controversy. That's news. It's the old man bites dog story. The fact is that 365 days of the year, the churches are filled with believing, caring people. But we talk about the one time in ten years that there is a problem. Obviously, though, as with politicians, when it gets to the one time in ten years that there's a problem, I find that clerics tend to be their own worst enemies. That was true with the scandals of the Evangelical preachers. It's certainly been true with the problems of sex abuse in the Catholic Church. I have yet to hear a bishop stand up and say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I confess to letting this person stay in my diocese." There are a variety of things like that, where the problems that do come out are handled so badly by the people who are being covered, that it exacerbates the problem.

But a lot of it is in the eye of the beholder. One of the many problems I have with the Lichter study [for the Knights of Columbus, 1991] is how you decide what's negative and what's positive in religion coverage. Was it negative to say that the Vatican was holding up a document that it believed was giving an international human right to abortion? I don't think so. I did a piece when the pope came last time about the Catholic Church's lobbying for social justice on Capitol Hill. My colleagues here on the panel loved it. But I'm sure that there are plenty of people who heard conservatives on the Hill saying the church just another liberal lobby group. And someone could have said, "That's negative." What's negative?

Particularly for the Catholic Church, there is a serious issue here that is: What is church? Is it the hierarchy? Or is it the people of God? It is a serious question. You have people viewing these things differently. We journalists, of course, would say that a lot of what we do is just neutral. That we're just reporting what's in the polls, what the polls show. Russell Shaw in the *Nieman Reports* said that he thinks we influence

The fact is that 365 days of the year, the churches are filled with believing, caring people. But we talk about the one time in ten years that there is a problem.

Cokie Roberts

the polls by our reporting. I'm just not sure that's true. The best evidence is that a lot of the Catholic Church, for a good part of this century, has been countercultural in all kinds of important and good ways. I think we are seeing the culture coming back around to it. The fact that we're even having a forum like this. The fact that ABC has hired a religion reporter. They might even finally show people going to church on a sit com. That will be when times have really changed.

The fact that the president of the United States and the would-be Republican nominee think family values are the main thing to talk about to attract voters to their causes, argues that the counterculturalism of churches through the '60s and '70s is paying off. The evidence of religion in American society today, which is as we all know the healthiest of any country on earth, gives lie to the notion that the press is negatively influencing people about religion in any significant fashion.

Dionne: I just wanted to tell a wonderful story about Cokie Roberts covering the extraordinary synod in Rome. It was a great blessing for all of us that she was there. And I overheard her doing a live conversation with National Public Radio. For her segment, she was asked the question: Is covering the extraordinary synod at all like covering the Congress? And Cokie said, and please correct me if I'm misquoting you, "Oh, yes, it's a lot alike, you know. There's a very big dome. There's lots of marble everywhere, and you have a bunch of guys who say one thing and mean another" [laughter/applause].

Roberts: Listen, I got attacked by a priest for saying it.

Russert: Our next panelist has actually spent a lot of his time on just that notion, that words are important and do have a meaning. Terry Eastland of *Forbes Media Critic*.

Terry Eastland: I do think that there is an epistemological problem of sorts, if you will, between the media, broadly construed, and religion. By religion I mean traditional religion, the great faiths of the world, those that stretch for centuries and millennia backward in time: Jewish, Christian,

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Muslim, and the rest. It's important for us to know that traditional religion is a premodern phenomenon.

The media are most definitely a modern phenomenon. This is true in terms, certainly, of the media's origins. In this country, the first newspaper was published in 1690 one morning in Boston. It did not survive the afternoon. It was censored out of business. Of course, we know the rest of the story. The media are very much with us.

Fundamentally, traditional religion understands the world in terms that include the supernatural. While the media, a cousin of social science and social science is a modern phenomenon, tend to exclude the supernatural as a category of explanation. Religion has things to say about a person's relationships in this world with other people. To be sure, its teachings are by no means confined to this world. Indeed, they are most plainly addressed to man's soul, which modern categories tend to mark off as strictly private.

Think of the morning newspaper in this city. It's a bulletin board for modern people to communicate through. That's what most Washingtonians do. They read their bulletin boards in the morning. This is an exercise that's especially important to the modern world, especially the one that is now coming into being everywhere it seems, with the demise of communism, with the spread of democracy, and with the spread of capitalism.

We moderns read the morning newspapers or we listen to Cokie Roberts in the evening...It's quite a different experience from the Israelites wandering in the wilderness; their morning newspaper consisted of manna delivered every morning from heaven.

Terry Eastland

It also bears noting that the news media, more than ever it seems, focus attention on tomorrow's news, sometimes writing it before it arrives. As the presence of the media comes to dominate in democratic societies, the media create an appetite for what is new. Good moderns always try to keep up with the news, of course. And then by supplying information about politics, about markets, especially, the media serve what has been described by de Tocqueville as the basic democratic principle, namely that each person is capable of deciding on his or her own.

For the traditional religious person, there is no such thing as religious news in an important sense. The condition of a man's soul is a matter about which he already knows the news, if you will—in the Christian tradition, for example, the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no further elaboration that needs to be read about that. Again, we moderns read the morning newspapers or we listen to Cokie Roberts in the evening. Our souls are subtly affected as we go through this exercise. It's quite a different experience from the Israelites wandering in the wilderness; their morning newspaper consisted of manna delivered every morning from heaven. I elaborate this point to suggest the difference between the traditional religious groups, a premodern phenomenon, and the media, which are distinctly modern.

What has this got to do with anything, you might ask. I think some of what is today called bias or slant, in the coverage of religion or religious issues or religion and politics, does stem, perhaps on a subliminal level, from the difference in these two kinds of worlds: the different approaches, the different categories in which people think. I thought it interesting in this respect that the pope's encyclical on morality, *Veritatis splendor*, was very much undercovered generally, certainly in the United States. Lack of coverage, I think, has to do with a certain blindness perhaps, a lack of an ability or willingness to understand some of these categories that are certainly essential to the traditional religious believer.

The suggestion has been made that most news editors today are very diversity-conscious. Diversity-conscious news editors need to hire more people who are explicitly religious. The argument is that they will at least understand religion well enough to help the news organization avoid such egregious mistakes as the infamous one by E.J.'s newspaper last year when it called the people who watched television evangelists quote, "largely poor and uneducated and easy to command." What the *Post* was guilty of was a kind of stereotyping, the same kind of stereotyping that it takes great pains to avoid, I would say, in other contexts.

I think there are generally three problems with coverage. First, frequently there is the reduction of religion or a religious issue that deals with politics purely to politics, so that the religious aspects are obscured or somehow minimized.

Second, there is increasingly a failure to cover the political positions of those people who are motivated for religious reasons to be involved in politics. I notice that there is frequent reference made to those in the so-called religious right in terms of their support for something called school prayer. I think that locution without any elaboration obscures almost all of the issues involved. For those who know the law in this area, I know of no litigator who would be described as being part of the religious right, who seeks to overturn the original school prayer decision, the *Engel* case, in 1962. So I think it is important to elaborate what exactly we mean by being for school prayer.

Third, there is a failure to cover the legal aspects of certain political-religious disputes. To take perhaps the most evident example to me: late in 1993, the Congress passed something called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Now this is something that Bill Clinton said was nothing less than a very important issue to him personally. The paucity of coverage on this bill was striking, as well as the inability of journalists even to see the political significance here. It was an effort to legislatively respond to a 1990 Supreme Court de-

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cision and to codify standards by which judges would evaluate claims of religious liberty. What was striking about this legislation was that it managed to gather together such previously at-odds groups as People for the American Way and Concerned Women for America. All these people were in favor of this particular piece of legislation. Yet, the deeper significance of it was not very well elaborated.

Finally, I quite agree with the comment made earlier about the ghetto coverage of religion. There is too much of that. When the *New York Times* manages to spring Peter Steinfels out of his Saturday slot and put him on the front page, writing interestingly about religion, that's all to the good. When the *Washington Post* does that, it's to the good. I'd like to see more newspapers do that.

Russert: One of the people who has helped educate journalists is Helen Alvare, from the U. S. Catholic Conference.

Helen Alvare: My perspective is as someone who speaks to reporters, to the media, probably four or five times a day on subject matter that makes me in my professional life a walking, talking embodiment of the overlap between religion, politics, and sex. Since abortion is in the media so often and so explosively overlapping all those categories, it makes my former job as a corporate litigator, which I had thought contentious, seem a joke [laughter].

I want to talk from my perspective as a participant, as a respondent to reporters and columnists, to print, audio, and video journalists. I want also to talk briefly about something that I refer to as the abortion distortion. People have said that when abortion entered constitutional jurisprudence, it upset all kinds of balances in terms of fundamental rights and privacy rights. A similar thing has happened in the media. Abortion has both been affected by the way the media treats religion, but I think it's turned around and has affected the coverage of religion as a whole, in particular, the level of civility between church and the media.

I would start by agreeing with everyone that those who cover religion need more background in the subject. When I speak to a full-time religion reporter—and I can think of many, *New York Times, Saint Petersburg Times, Time, Newsweek*—who actually has a background in religion, you can tell. The article has a consistency to it, quotations are in context. Whereas when you're filling someone in about a discrete subject within a larger arena of religion, sometimes my quotations are like a thud. They're like inserting a Latin phrase in the middle of an article in English. They make no sense because the context is not there. So education and background in religion itself are important.

Often, too, I am interviewed and reporters have the perspective that it's not important for them to have knowledge about religion, because religion isn't about knowledge. It's about opinion. It's about faith and not reason. Reporters, I find in many ways are very fideistic in this way. The overlap between faith and reason is one that I'm constantly bringing up.

I'm often reminded of those pictures in the Middle Ages of the different disciplines. Theology used to be at the top and it used to be considered that if you were a theologian, you were one of the most educated of people. Now, to know theology is no big deal. You presume that that's not the most important discipline there is. Anyone can have an opinion on that. Therefore, the fact that you are a specialist or speak for a church, you don't know any more about it than I do. It's almost seen as if there's really no difference between ignorance and knowledge about it. A particular place where I find this lack of background difficult—and it touches on something that E.J. talked about—the Catholic Church and other churches must be clear to the world, when they enter the public square; they must explain why a religious body is addressing a subject of importance to the secular world.

The reason why we do it and the reason why I do it in the area of abortion, is because I don't believe I'm speaking about revelation or theology directly. I believe I'm communicating natural law. I had a very interesting encounter in this re-

gard on the "Brinkley" program; Cokie Roberts was there, and Sam Donaldson. I was speaking about the abortion position that the Catholic Church takes based upon our understanding, from our rational review of science and so forth, that this was a human life that we were talking about, and that it ought to have a right not to be killed. Sam Donaldson's response, which was one I encounter regularly, was, "I thought this was about mortal sin for you guys. What's this natural law stuff?" That is a common response. It's my responsibility and the church's responsibility to make the world understand when it is that we are speaking theologically, and when it is that we are speaking from natural law. It's my responsibility to make them understand that I'm not here preaching to them as if they should accept it because it is a religious truth, but that I am here, and that I have a right to be heard, because I am speaking about a subject that is rationally available to every human being who cares to take the time to look into it. That's my job. But I would also appreciate some more background and knowledge on the part

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of the person interviewing me.

Another problem for the church in the public square, and it bears on both the responsibility of journalists and the responsibility of the church, is to clearly articulate, when you are speaking about a position that is morally important, the difference between something that is important to the church and you are not trying to change the law; and when something is both important to the church and ought to be reflected in the law. There's a common mixup of these, in particular on the areas of abortion and contraception.

You saw that very much in Cairo [The United Nations Conference on Population and Development, September 1994]. For the church, abortion is a public issue because a human life is at stake. It's *per se* public. It's about whether or not a third human being has a right to live or not. Contraception is an important moral issue, but contraception is not a public issue in the same way because a life is not at stake. Therefore, we don't seek to make contraception illegal, the way we seek to make abortion illegal, in our public comments and in our public endeavors. But you saw that the reporting on Cairo covered the theological position on contraception as if we were seeking to get the Cairo document to ban it. When in fact, what we were seeking there was more human rights related to contraception, asking what happens when contraception gets in the hand of the government. Well, it could lead to some coercion. It could be given to teen-agers without parental involvement. Contraception could be defined in such a way as to include abortion or exclude natural family planning.

Now, the thing that I refer to as the abortion distortion: The level of hostility has risen in the public debate over abortion. The depth of the comments about the church made on radio, on television are so hostile that I believe that that's begun to affect the interchange on issues other than abortion. In other words, it's acceptable to be hostile here.

It's acceptable, as one network tried to do to me the other day, to have you and a person who says they're Catholic and disagrees with you, and a second, secular person who disagrees with you on abortion—to have a network say that's a fair program, because, after all, there's equal hostility in the church and outside the church. Your back's up against the wall anyway, and you're just a bunch of white, celibate, old male guys, and you don't really represent most people, so your opponents deserve two to one. This was the kind of argumentation that was coming to me from the producer. The absence of civility here is leading to an absence of civility in areas way outside of abortion. I'm very used now to being accused of being personally responsible for the Inquisition and the Crusades.

The abortion distortion has badly infected other areas of interchange between the public and journalists and religion. For instance, the other day I was doing a radio program on NPR and the host said to the Muslim [also being interviewed]: "Isn't your religion kind of famous for degrading women?" Famous? Can you imagine that sort of generalization being made about any particular race or ethnic group? It would be a national scandal. And yet, for that kind of statement to be made about a religion seems to be more acceptable, and I do believe that's in large part because of the tone of the abortion debate in our society.

In the four years that I've been interacting with the media, the good news for me is that I think I've come to be comfortable with journalists and therefore, vice versa. I believe that a lot of the problems between those who speak for religions and those who interview them, can be overcome in many of the same human ways that problems between any two groups are overcome. These sorts of regular interchange can improve the actual quality of reporting, as well as the quality of the relationship between religionists and members of the media.

Russert: Thank you Helen and thank you all. The conference in Cairo was a pretty interesting example, I think, of a lot of the issues and pressures that we all confront. I remember when the first reports were coming out, it was largely being treated in some of the reports, NBC included, as the Catholic Church imposing its view on the world. I began to think then, as I have regularly over the last several years, when we talk about diversity—about having more women and people of color at the table—how that has improved what we do. It is also imperative that we have people of religion or at least access to people of religion involved in the journalistic process because what I think evolved from Cairo was a very interesting debate. At first, it was simply the Catholic Church. Then suddenly, well, wait a minute, there's also a coalition here, with the Muslim Fundamentalists, Islamic nations. And wait a minute, just what did the State Department say in May? If you read the cable and you read Tim Wirth's comments, it's very clear that the United States was going to take a very forward position on advocating abortion rights worldwide. And the administration, recognizing that, had a change in policy.

Now what brought that about? I think in large part it was the constant news coverage of the debate in Cairo. It began to be a much more objective discussion and more objectively covered. I can mark the very first day when the media said, "Roman Catholic Church and other conservative organizations." I said, wait a minute. Now just a second. Why do you say conservative? On what issue? Is to be against abortion rights a conservative position? That set off a whole discussion and debate, but it was healthy for everyone.

Dionne: I wanted to go back to something Helen said, because I think this also goes to this issue when she talked about the abortion distortion. Stephen Carter, in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, talks about how the whole abortion debate has created a fundamental shift in the way these issues are perceived. If you go back to the civil rights period, the people who complained the most about the intervention of churches in the public square were mostly Southern

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segregationists who were furious at the extent to which the civil rights movement grew out of and was based within the churches. And in his own biography, Falwell acknowledges that he, at one point, preached against religious involvement in politics and changed his mind because of *Roe* v. *Wade*.

I think that one of the hurdles that religious institutions face, and I do not think it's an easy question to resolve, is the issue of the legitimacy of their intervention on any given issue. I think Helen put it well when she talked about the need for justifications in some ways may be greater for religious institutions, partly because of our separationist tradition, or Terry would prefer me to say, a nonestablishment tradition. Because religious voices get challenged as soon as they enter the public square, when people disagree with them the first thing they say is not that your argument is wrong, it's that you have no right to be there. And this is not, and here I speak as a *Commonweal* Catholic, this is not simply a phenomenon of liberals or the left. When the Catholic bishops were debating their economic letter, some of the harshest things I have ever seen said about bishops came not from liberals, but from conservatives, who, for their own reasons, had objections to what the bishops were doing. I want to conclude by saying that one of the problems, that is a kind of irreducible problem, is that the Catholic Church, and all churches, will always face this attack on their legitimacy inside the debate. The task is, I think, twofold. One, to answer those arguments. And, also, for people, if you will, on the secular side or on the media side, not to question automatically the right of religious people to be in the public debate, because I don't know how we could have a public debate without their presence.

David Coolidge: [*Graduate, Georgetown Law School*] wanted to ask a question about the most controversial topic that a number of people alluded to, and that is when religion and media intersect on questions of sexuality.

What I observe is that when there's reporting of religious teachings to do with sexuality, generally the pattern is that they report it as rules. But I very rarely read any explanation or rationale from the religious perspective of the person whose teachings are being described.

Alvare: We say that the reason that we teach as we do is not to repress sexuality or to deny it, but because sexuality is so important that it ought to be valued in these ways. And the problem is that in response to a particular question that's being asked, and this is where I often think the confusion between natural law and pure revelation or what's a moral issue versus a public law issue comes into play—I say this and they'll say yeah but the end result is, you don't want the government giving contraception to teen-agers, and I don't care why. The end result is a question: Are you for this or against it? Very rarely is there reporting done about the *why* of our teachings on sexuality. And to me, they are countercultural and empowering, particularly to feminists, which is why at natural family planning conventions you'll find people who are there, not only for the orthodoxy of the position, but who are there purely as secular feminists, there for empowerment of their own bodies and biology. That is not explored.

Joseph Komonchak: [*Theology professor, The Catholic University of America*] If news is controversy, then perhaps we really do have a serious discussion point here because religion is far more than controversy, and so perhaps the media or the news cannot really deal with religion. There's a sense in which the question has to be posed back to the media: What counts as a story? Both for a major newspaper at least, and I'm sure for a television program, a great deal of planning often goes into the stories that are more than the day's stories. A lot of money goes into them as well. So what will count really as a story about religion?

It's far more than the question of controversy or of unusual events. I grant you that the fact that 60 million people

have gone to church on Sunday should not be a headline on Monday. But I do think that that enters into the question, and I'm glad to hear so many people suggest that there should be something more than that little one page on Saturday. The *New York Times* can have a whole section entitled Science on Tuesdays, in which it commissions stories and the stories are not all about controversy. They're also about significant and interesting things that are going on in science. I would think that we might have something similar with regard to religion.

Roberts: I could make a very good case that the coverage of religion is considerably better than the coverage of Congress, in terms of what it tells people about the institution. I think that the same thing is probably true about the coverage of education. And, yes, it's true that Science Times is out there, and I think you have some data on who reads this stuff. This is a marketplace decision. It's not that the newspaper editors are sitting there saying they're people dying for religion and we're not giving it to them because we hate religion. That is not something anybody who believes in making money would do.

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Dionne: Cokie, I think, is completely right. I am sure the church gets better play than the Congress. Gets better, more favorable coverage than the Congress.

Roberts: *Nobody's calling for term limits for priests* [laughter].

Dart: Yes, controversy is an element of a news story that will maybe push it up somewhere near the front. But another word for controversy is conflict, and conflict usually arises over something where the issue is unsettled or opinions divided. The newspaper or news broadcast is a place where we try to keep up with what the different sides are saying. Is there anything new that I need to know so I can intelligibly discuss the topic myself? It's part of the news. We almost expect that.

News is to keep up with what's going on, and conflict is almost a natural part of news. It makes it more interesting. But the professional's role is to do it in a measured, accurate, and perceptive way. It's bad journalism when you're really going for the inflammatory remarks and are only quoting the people on the far left and far right. You're taking the easy way out, repeating the phrases that you saw in a previous story and not trying to get somebody to improve upon that depiction or characterization. The journalist is still going to shrug his or her shoulders and say, well, this one story isn't going to tell you everything, but please get acquainted, as you probably will if you're really interested, with other news reports and with the story as it unfolds.

Eastland: Speaking of this great question, what is news, there's the other question, what is truth? Go back to the nineteenth century: when Lincoln was assassinated, I am struck with the way in which nineteenth-century or 1865 papers carried that. One of them, in New York, had a headline that was simply "Sad Day," with a one-column story and not much more. News was not very exciting. If you will, there was not a focus on controversy in those days, such as it has become. I recently had the occasion to review a lot of writing on religion over this past year, and I noticed there were a lot of articles that were written, if you will, off the news. There was a case in the Supreme Court, this year, the Kiryas Joel case. The *New York Times* and other news organizations sent reporters up there to report at some length on the context from which this religion clause case came. The *New York Times* ran an extensive series on Muslims this past year, which was not occasioned by anything particular, other than the increasing presence of Muslims in the United States. So, frequently there are stories of this character that are religious in nature, that are sort of written off the news, off of some particular news event, not just controversy.

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John Dart

Dionne: There is more than one kind of news story. Where news is controversy, a lot of this stuff you read, if you are Catholic or in any of the institutions being covered, you're not going to be happy. No one in a church will like it any more than Clinton supporters like some of the things said about him in the newspapers. The interesting issue to join is the other kinds of stories that newspapers, especially, but also television and television magazine shows, are filled with, stories on all manner of subjects. Things you couldn't even conceive of somebody doing a story on. Where is the role of religion in those sorts of programs? One of the most powerful things I've heard on the radio in a long time was a piece Scott Simon did on NPR after the killing of the doctor who had performed abortions. He did an amazing piece going back to John Brown. He took very seriously the whole notion that the people doing the killing believe that they were operating in a tradition that was akin to John Brown's tradition. And then he raised some very serious moral questions. He had a whole range of points of view. And at the end of that story, you felt much more educated about John Brown's raid. But you really felt, I think, a prochoice or a prolife person would listen to that and say, that was a remarkable essay on an issue that is dividing us. I think the media are capable of doing things like that.

Alvare: The subject of controversy seems to be something that interests everyone. While I understand, particularly for the consumer market, the drive to look for a controversy, I can't tell you the number of times a reporter has used the expression, "What's the hook? How are you selling me this story? What's new?"

On the other hand, I think there's not only room for these kinds of step back and analyze in light of a series of news events. Just as an example: I keep pointing out to reporters that Catholic women are actually more prolife than Catholic men. I think this is something that's terribly interesting and could amplify stories where the questions of feminism, Catholicism, and the politics of abortion come together. *Glamour* magazine, I think we finally persuaded into at least exposing this reality.

Thomas Reese, S.J.: [*Fellow, Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University*] I often get calls from reporters and usually they are trying to fill out the other side of the quote. They have a quote on one side and they want a quote on the other side, because this is the way they can prove to

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their readers and their editor that this is an objective story. The trap is always to find the extremists on the two sides and have them articulating pure opinion without any backup, without any facts, without any argumentation. This is a problem clearly, not just for religion reporting. I mean the recent discussion of the media's covering of health care: Who's winning? Who's losing? Very few people ever knew what was in the health packages. This same model was imposed on the Cairo conference. Is the Vatican winning or is Planned Parenthood winning? But, again, going full circle, I don't think we can simply blame the journalists because these papers and these stories are selling and the public likes simple stories. They like a contest. They like news as a sports events with winners and losers because it simplifies the understanding. So I think we're dealing with a wider cultural phenomenon here. Not simply good guys and bad guys in the media and the churches.

Dionne: I think that the biggest danger of distortion in news stories is not that the reporter will not report something from both sides, it is, that the reporter will not understand both sides or try. The second is that there is often no balance between the two kinds of quotes. Often you will see a quote that makes a very reasonable and reasoned case on the one side, and a bald assertion on the other side, with no backup, but that side is covered. I think this point goes to our failure to really try to create arguments and to force choices in the sense that make it easier for people out there to make choices. We need to report real arguments that people are having with each other and I don't think we do that enough.

On the marginalization of religion and why are religious aspects of stories treated badly: One of the paradoxical effects of what Helen referred to as the abortion distortion and the rise of religiously based political movements is that you have more of a religious voice and a religious aspect in news stories today than you did twenty or thirty years ago. It may not always be done well, but I do think there is infinitely greater awareness of the social and political importance of religious faith today.

Roberts: I'd like to say one last thing about the controversy aspect. Sometimes in the interest of fairness, we are unfair. We give the two sides equal weight when, in fact, in whatever the political discussion is, whether it's a church discussion, a congressional discussion, whatever, they don't have equal weight. By giving them equal weight in the piece, it's distorted. An example of that was the debate in Congress over sanctions against South Africa, where the vote was basically 405 to 30. We gave two minutes to this guy, two minutes to this guy, two minutes to this guy, and two minutes to this guy. You do that because you think that's fair and also it is more interesting to listen to. But it doesn't give you a real sense of the fact that the debate really went for an hour on one side and fifteen or twenty minutes on another. So there's that problem.

But there's something to be said for reporting controversy. I think of two examples of issues that, because they were not controversial, were not reported. And society as a whole suffered for that. One was the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the other was the Americans with Disabilities Act. Because there was no controversy surrounding them, nobody knew they existed. The first disability bill that was written was a terrible bill. Because there was no controversy and nobody wrote about it, so there was no spotlight of the press on the actual piece of legislation. Then the bill got fixed up. But society was not prepared because we did not cover it. Society did not understand the new rules and regulations for people with disabilities. We didn't cover it because there wasn't controversy. There's a reason to be grateful for controversy because at least it tells you what's going on. □

Further Reading

Speakers and panelists refer in their remarks to a variety of studies and articles on religion and the media. These are listed below, along with others readers may find useful.

Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986).

Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson, Linda S. Lichter, *Media Coverage of the Catholic Church* (New Haven, CT: Knights of Columbus, 1991).

Patrick Riley and Russell Shaw, *Anti-Catholicism in the Media* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1993, $16.95).

John Dart and Jimmy Allen, *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media* (The Freedom Forum, Vanderbilt University, 1222 16th Avenue, Nashville, TN, 37212, 615-321-9588, free).

Stanley Rothman, "Religion's Bad Press," *First Things*, January 1994 (156 Fifth Ave., Suite 400, N.Y., NY 10010, $3.75).

"God in the Newsroom," *Nieman Reports*, Summer 1993 (One Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138, $5).

"Religion and the News: A Conference Report" (The Freedom Forum, Columbia University, 2950 Broadway, N.Y., NY 10027-7004, 212-678-6600, free).

Stephen Bates, "Separation of Church and Press," *Forbes MediaCritic*, Summer 1994 (60 Fifth Ave., N.Y., NY 10011, 1-800-825-0061, $7.95).

"Faith in a Box: Television and Religion," No. 4 (Media Research Center, 113 S. West St., 2nd Flr., Alexandria, VA 22314, 703-689-9733).

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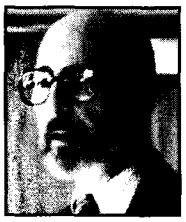

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New York Times

Mary Alice Williams
Ice Blue Productions

Judith Banki
Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Foundation

Randall Balmer
Barnard College

John Leo
U. S. News & World Report

William F. Baker
WNET Channel 13

Peter Steinfels, *Keynote Speaker* *(Go to page 14 for text!)*

DISCUSSION

William Baker: Peter concentrated principally on print media which we all know is significant. But we also know that in this society, unfortunately, the electronic media really dominate thought and opinion. According to a recent survey 85 percent of the people in this country said they would make a decision about whom they vote for based on the political commercials, not the programs, they see on television, and the average television set in the home is on seven hours a day.

The real world, too, has to do with the responses I get running a major public television institution. We can do a program on religious, or other controversial areas (nothing is more controversial than a controversial religious area, I might add), that gets a 1 or 2 rating (in New York the equivalent of about 200,000 people) and I might get 5,000 or 6,000 letters. Whereas when I was in commercial television for thirty years, I would often broadcast programs that would get 20 and 30 ratings and the next day get no letters, no communications, nothing.

My experience has to do with the naive nature of the journalists and the management in the television business, both commercial and public. I have sat in offices, one of them at Channel 13, talking to a number of very sophisticated people and suggested that perhaps we do a series on religion, and one of the producers with some seniority looked at me and said, "But Bill, you know, the separation of church and state, it's illegal for us to do a religious program." And that was in the hallowed halls of public television. You can imagine what it was like in the newsrooms of commercial television.

The problems in commercial television, though, are much more transparent. They are tied to the bottom line, or what I used to call maximum honorable profits, which means you have to do what gets the audience. Most people presume in the newsroom that religion does not get the audience because they go by these churches and see them mostly empty; they figure there's nobody that really cares. The other problem is youth. Because commercial institutions are so concerned about making the bottom line work out, they very often hire the brightest, the most charming, but also the least experienced people possible because you can pay them less. But they don't have the sophistication to really report on sophisticated issues and subjects, one of them being religion.

With all of that said as a preamble, is there any good news? Yes. The good news, as I see it, is as follows. There is absolutely no question in my mind that resonating heavily with television and radio mass audiences, is the subject of faith, theology, religion, ideas. I can give you some specific examples. Bill Moyers, who works in our shop at WNET, produced a very popular Joseph Campbell series. The mail and the responses that we got from the series were incredible. You know it has to be good if public television will rerun it as a pledge show and ask for money around it. And Joseph Campbell we must have run six or seven times as a pledge show and the money kept coming in.

In many foreign countries, especially England, the BBC has a huge religion unit, a highly funded unit, and they do major prime-time programs on the subject of religion. Here nobody in commercial or public television has that kind of resource. There is a dearth of programming on this subject

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on television and there are a lot of reasons. I find all of them to be inexcusable. I have been working for five or six years trying to figure out a way to get more religious, philosophical, theological content in a broad spectrum on public television. Even I, with the job I have, have not been especially successful.

Bill Moyers and I have been chasing money for four years. Our dream is to see a program on Channel 13, eventually fed nationwide, every Sunday night where Moyers would talk about issues of philosophy and theology. Kind of the bookend to the morning sermon. But this is not a homily. This would be intellectual discussion of a philosophical, theological nature. This is a relatively low-cost show, a hand mike and a desk and a lamp in the corner. We have not found any foundations willing to put up money for that. We identified only two major foundations in all of America who are willing to give any money at all to electronic media for religious or philosophical subjects.

Randall Balmer: At least once a semester I remind my students you cannot understand American history and culture without understanding the role that religion has played in shaping that history and culture. The reverse is also true. American religion or religion in America has been shaped profoundly by American history and culture. One of the reasons I love what I do in the study of American religion is you have the symbiosis between the two, this give and take. The influence is really not on one side, it comes from both. I think, too, as Mr. Baker indicated, and demonstrated very well, Americans are passionate about religion. Religion resonates with the American people. They are interested in it. I think that's probably true. The real question for me is where are the stories.

I don't think you can cover religion in America from New York City without getting out. I don't think you can cover religion in America primarily through news releases. I don't think you cover it by covering denominations. Americans don't care much about theology or ideology. That may be good or bad, incredible or otherwise, but that's true, it seems to me. And I must take issue with Peter on one point. He described a whole culture war sort of rubric that has become rather popular in recent years. That implies a kind of dualism and I think that the elite, including the media elite, tend to buy into that, whether progressive or conservative. My sense is the great middle portion of Americans are not energized by those sorts of polarities.

I just completed a book on mainline Protestants, revisiting the twelve great churches that were designated as such by *Christian Century* magazine in 1950. Time after time, going out to these twelve churches all across the country, I asked people about their theology, about their ideology, and they would throw up their arms. They have no idea. Theology is not important to them. But what's really exciting, it seems to me, is that there is this marvelous sort of eclecticism going on in American religion today. Now again, that may be regrettable theologically from an orthodox perspective, but people are dabbling in New Age sensibilities, New Age expressions of religion, and that to me is very exciting. There is, it seems to me, in America a kind of aggregation of narratives. Everyone is trying to put together her or his own story and theology. The cutting edge of what's going on in terms of religious sensibilities and beliefs and spirituality in America is an odd mix of New Age expressions and language, but curiously resonant of old-line sorts of rhetoric.

Growing up as a Fundamentalist in the Midwest, you hear about committing yourself to God, letting go, letting the Holy Spirit overcome you. You hear the same sort of language permeating New Age sensibilities and it's very exciting to see. There is a quest for immortality going on in America, among Americans these days. Why is that? It's probably for a number of rather complex reasons. These are the kinds of stories you are not going to get so often, it seems to me, here in New York City.

I wanted to respond finally to one of the rhetorical questions raised in the forum program having to do with negative stereotyping, Catholic-bashing and stereotyping, on the part of the media. We live today, it seems to me, in a culture of victimization. There is a certain status to be won in the American culture by claiming you are a victim. Minorities are "in" these days. Everyone wants to be a minority. You see a spate of books written by people who claim that, despite all appearances, we are a minority. I think of George Marsden's book, *The Soul of the American University*, for example. A wonderful example of that sort of thing. Those who are complaining about religious stereotyping, it seems to me, are not quite on the mark. Certainly, there probably is some of that going on, but let's be honest. When a member of the Catholic hierarchy claims that there is no connection between priestly pedophilia and the requirement of clerical celibacy, you don't need to caricature that. That's a caricature itself it seems to me. When Oliver North runs for the U.S. Senate as an Evangelical Christian and as a champion of traditional values, you don't need to caricature that. He's caricaturing himself. I think some of the blame that's been pointed at the media is in that sense misplaced.

John Leo: The *New York Times* was under pressure to hire somebody to cover intellectual trends. It occurred to me after four months in the factory that I was an ideal choice, because I was Catholic. Since Catholics were totally outside the mainstream of American cultural and intellectual ideas, I could cover them with a sense of discovery and fairness [laughter]. Anyhow, I enjoyed my little stay at the *Times*; in fact I was dragged into covering a lot of religion too. In those days, it was: "What did the cardinal do yesterday for breakfast" kind of coverage. What I discovered at the *Times* is that it's a very different culture. It's a totally secular culture which tries to be indulgent about hangovers from the Middle Ages and therefore to treat Catholics fairly.

To jump to today. If you try to follow what went on in

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Cairo at what I call the Abortion Conference, you couldn't figure it out from the *Times*, because in the non-Steinfels articles they just have no clue as to what's going on. One of the little contributions was that they presented it as the pope with a few terrorists defying the entire world. One front-page story said there were only twelve nations with the pope. Two phone calls to Cairo established that there were twenty-three nations for a total of thirty that had boycotted the Cairo conference. So you had a lot of dissent in Cairo. It wasn't just the pope and a few terrorists against the world. The coverage was really a mess. It was presented in the basic story line of the press.

The basic story line of the press on religious matters derives from the Enlightenment and in modern days the ACLU. That story is the lonely individual against oppressive centralized power. That story line goes on all the time in coverage of religion.

Let me jump to the famous Act-Up invasion of Saint Patrick's Cathedral. That story appeared as a two-inch item in the *Times* the next day which failed to mention, perhaps they didn't know about it, the desecration of the host. Although it did mention that Act-Up had run into the cathedral, it didn't have any of the gamey details about interrupting the Mass and spitting out the host and jumping up and down on it. So when the tabloids picked it up, the *Times* scratched its head for ten days and figured out it had to sort of get the story into the paper. So ten or twelve days later a piece appeared by Jason DeParle who had just been hired. The fellow who had desecrated the host—I forgot his name; let's say it's John Smith. The lead of the story was "For John Smith it was an act of love." He had loved his way to the cathedral and jumped up and down on the host and shown his respect for the church. Well, this is not journalism, folks. This is playing to a constituency.

The *Times* also buried Act-Up's campaign against the New York City Health Commissioner, Steven Joseph. Act-Up harassed his wife and put paint on his house and everything else. They buried that way down below too. Well, the *Times* doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's playing to certain constituencies and we know who those constituencies are. It's the race and gender PC lobby and the new publisher has made clear what the coverage is going to be on these matters. So, you can't expect to get the straight goods on these things. And it's not just the *Times*. The *Boston Globe* once tried to cover-up an Act-Up desecration of an ordination in Boston. They had shouted outside, disrupted the ceremony, mounted a display of Jesus committing sodomy, and then when people came out of the church, they pelted the parents, including a little old lady, the mother of a new priest, with condoms. Well this went in the *Boston Globe* as a colorful, peaceful, and happy demonstration. Those are the exact words. No mention of anything that actually occurred. I wrote a letter to a friend who is on the desk at the *Globe*. I never got an answer back on why that happened. These are just routine horror stories in the way things are covered.

Take the coverage of abortion. David Shaw, the press critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, did a 20,000-word piece on coverage of the abortion issue. 20,000 words! Four endless segments in the *Los Angeles Times*, saying it was all distorted and dishonest. He had big name reporters, Ethan Bonner, of the *Globe*, others, quoted as saying this. This series had a great impact around the country and he got nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for the abortion series and for the McMartin child-care series. He got the Pulitzer Prize but they gave it to him just for the McMartin thing, not for his abortion story, because they didn't want to give a prize for that.

That story sank without a trace. I have never seen an article on his reportage on the abortion issue. Anyway, not in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, not in any journalism review, not in the *Times* or anywhere. So, things are being ruled out of court all the time in the press and it isn't because they set out to be unfair, it's because they take the role of the individual against authority and because certain issues are conceived to be settled already. The abortion issue is settled. We are almost at the point where the right-to-die issue is about to be considered in the press as settled. So, I have no real optimistic theory on how to turn this around but the press is more and more an alien culture that you have to translate before you know what's really going on.

Mary Alice Williams: Is there an antireligious bias in newsrooms? I speak from a television perspective and I don't think so. I think the context in which reporters work has the effect of making it seem as though reporters are god-

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John Leo

less, or at the very least god-free. This is the only nation on earth that was specifically founded on no religion, even though its people are profoundly religious.

Religion reporting is like parenthood, the only training is personal experience. Business reporters don't get their jobs without some business experience or an MBA. Medical reporters are expected to have passed through medical school, legal reporters through law. Religion reporting is not treated with the same seriousness as those subjects or even the weather report. So, those expected to report on religious matters, people usually from the general assignment ranks, fall back on what they know through a time-tested method makes for a good story. Wars, battles in which there is al-

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ways a winner or loser—politics. The culture wars over abortion and homosexuality, to name just two, are inherently political. I don't think it's fair for any of us to separate those out as religious issues. They are also broader political issues.

Here's another point. Reporters live in a discipline replete with fact-checkers. There is no empirical evidence of the Lord's presence in our time. It doesn't get calculated into the government's index of leading economic indicators. Faith—you can't see it, you can't taste it, you can't touch it, and you certainly can't prove it. Many reporters, because of the murder, mayhem, injustice, and societal ills they do see, up-close and personally, cannot comprehend anything other than a random universe and so view those who see a grand design as fringe. It's not that they are mean-spirited and cynical, though heaven knows some certainly are or we wouldn't be subjected to what we are subjected to each night on television. Reporters also work in a craft that relies on labels, particularly in television, with its time constraints and the fact that viewers can't re-read us. They've got to get us on the first shot. Labels tend to present a pictorial image that takes just one word rather than several paragraphs. Thus they are perceived as engaging in, say Catholic-bashing or Muslim-stereotyping.

Here is a truism: Reporters and editors are very often described as malicious, venal, and all manner of venial sins, but we scarcely ever accuse them of stupidity, which is usually the cause of their offense. There are editors who do not know that Baptist churches do not have altars. They do not know the difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims or between the religious right and Fundamentalists. They do not know that Judaism has four contemporary forms. Most of what happens in our churches is good news. If the taxpayer actually had to foot the bill for the food kitchens, the AIDS hospitals, the child care, the senior centers, that church and church people and all believers provide voluntarily, the nation would be hobbled. That kind of stuff doesn't make the evening news.

Negative stories: Are we not to cover them at all? That's not our job. Right before John Paul II came to Denver, in the summer of 1993, NBC News was bent on doing a story about priestly pedophilia. They were going to do it. Inexorably we were reaching the day when they were going to assign it and so I walked into the managing editor and said: "It's mine," because, based on my knowledge of the other reporters at the network, I figured I was probably best positioned to treat it with fairness. I went to the Servants of the Paraclete [treatment centers], I went to Saint Luke's, which has a fabulous program. My opinion is that the church did not handle it very well initially until it hit the headlines. Then they started recognizing that it is a disease, incurable disease like alcoholism, and started getting the handful, in terms of ratio, of priests who were perpetrators of pedophilia out of the parishes and away from the children and into some sort of treatment. So on balance, in the end, the reporting of it was helpful, not only to the parishes and the church, but to the

pedophiles themselves.

To the extent that people in various communities don't like what reporters say about religion, they don't trust us and we all lose our credibility. When I returned to NBC, five years ago, I became the religion department because I had the impressive background of having been—I am very proud to say—in the grip of the Jesuits during my education which qualified me for well, very little, but there I was. I was the religion department. They gave me no budget, so I would call around to my friends in the network all over the world and beg them to do freebie stories for me that I could put into my hour-specials. Usually I was given two weeks to put an hour-special together. When I quit, there went the religion department. So, I was hired to do an hour special which I did, which ran in July on "States of Faith in America." An hour is from here to eternity in television terms but still, it was one of those hours that NBC chose to allow stations to run at local option and in some places we got wonderful placement. In New York, the program ran on Sunday, July 3, at 5:00 o'clock in the morning. It was nice. You would have liked it.

From the church's angle, this can be an area too hot to touch, particularly for television reporters who, as it has been pointed out, tend to reach more people than a single newspaper does. Too hot to touch because people are so passionate about their beliefs that it's almost a no-win situation for anyone trying to report on what's going on within their own churches, not to mention reporters who aren't part of their own churches and don't know a lot about it.

Many churches' PR problems are brought on by the churches themselves. If religions and churches want to be reported on and given the same treatment that our political institutions and our educational institutions and our police force get, then they have to expect the kind of reporting that is not always going to be glowing. They can't have unrealistic expectations. Do churches adequately represent themselves to the public-at-large? No, they tend to keep good news a secret.

And finally, we live in a democracy, a busy, noisy, messy democracy that is the foundation of our freedom, our free-

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dom to speak and to act and to worship as we please. Many churches are inherently undemocratic. Pope John Paul doesn't give American Catholics a vote. American reporters, with the exception of a handful of the elite, are not opinion leaders. They are opinion reactors, products of their own families and neighborhoods and communities.

Joseph O'Hare, S.J.: [*President, Fordham University*] About six years ago, I was invited by Ed Koch to become chairman of the New York City Campaign Finance Board. I have to say up until then, electoral reform had not been a consuming passion of mine. But I took this on and I discovered something about the media that I hadn't realized before. That is, that most reporters, while very anxious to decry electoral corruption and campaign abuses, were also extremely, in fact, I would say terminally, cynical about the possibility of any kind of electoral reform. I found this a very ironic attitude. On the one hand, they were anxious to point out any bit of chicanery or betrayal of the public trust on the part of elected officials. On the other hand, they were really very, very skeptical and negative that any reforms are really possible.

I wonder if this kind of cynicism that's built into the journalistic mind-set, when it's combined with what we have now in this country, a very, very short attention span, doesn't lead to a very dangerous combination. People are anxious to debunk. This is aggravated, I would say, by the Watergate syndrome where every young reporter wants to become Bernstein and Woodward and get the dirt on somebody. I think the two together, perhaps, create a dangerous combination.

My question is, is there some corrective mechanism in the whole practice of journalism as a profession that corrects tendencies like these and checks tides that would go in those kinds of directions?

Williams: Yes. It is an industry in which they cyclically eat their young and you're seeing a lot of that. Right now, you see it in news reports, including in the *New York Times*, about the increased cynicism in the press. There's a lot of self-flagellating going on about why they have become so cynical and mean-spirited. And it has. It is one of the reasons I left the business. There is a cleansing process. But there is a cycle and there will come a time when everybody loses the institutional memory ten years from now and they'll do it again. The last time we went through it was in 1982. It's now twelve years later and reporters are doing it again.

Francis Maniscalco: [*Director, Office of Media Relations, United States Catholic Conference*] Should religion reporting be rethought in terms of the expert sort of commentary that all newspapers have? Should Religion Wednesday follow Science Tuesday? And is religion reporting currently too closely based on the model of investigative or political reporting?

Steinfels: A good thing about the *Times*, as I showed, is that we have religion stories on page one, which a lot of other papers don't have. Religion is treated as part of the same world, the same real world as other things. It's not relegated to a special section which runs a real danger of accomplishing what Stephen Carter referred to as making religion a hobby that people have. But since a lot of religion coverage will be done by nonreligion specialists, whether you like it or not, most papers should have something roughly like a religion editor, not just a religion reporter, but a religion editor who has the same responsibilities as people in science and medicine at the *Times*. They are involved in checking out subjects, maybe having some involvement in the assigning of stories that touch upon those subjects, even if they're not the ones doing the reporting.

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Mary Alice Williams

Is religion reporting based too much on investigative reporting? Yes, to the extent to which we always assume that there are going to be two sides, not three or four or five, and that an event in the religious world will come to some kind of conclusion in which one side or the other will emerge as prevailing. Those formats do constrict us to the extent to which we don't sufficiently cover religious experience, particularly religious experience of the kinds of people who are apt to be readers of the *New York Times*. Not the religious experience of more-or-less dramatic or experimental or marginal groups in the society, members of which are always much more willing to talk to the press and be personal about their strongly felt religious convictions. Whereas teachers, lawyers, bank executives, and so on really abide by an American etiquette that says religion is private. They're more likely to talk about their sex lives than their religious life or prayer life. So it's a very difficult story to do—we have models for it, we have human interest models, etc.—but we have not done sufficient religion writing, reporting along those lines.

Just one caveat about that. I think a lot of the problems with people doing investigative or political type reporting on religious matters is that it's badly done. If it were well done, I think it would be perfectly all right. I think that the Catholic Church, for example, would have benefited from more, not less, early reporting on the question of clerical sexual abuse. That story went uncovered, except for the *National Catholic Reporter* that did do reporting on it and received a lot of criticism for it. Except for that, nothing. Early

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on, there were real pressures, sometimes economic pressures, that kept local newspapers from really reporting that story. Later, this became what I call a preconceived story. Everybody knew what the story was and they kept telling the same story over and over again. That it was closed up for so long was not to the benefit of the religious body, in this instance, the Catholic Church.

Paul Elie: [*Editor, Farrar, Straus & Giroux*] There's a lot of talk in forums such as this about religion as such and the necessity for fair reporting on religion. It turns religious people into advocates of religion in the abstract. But what's really happening in American religion? Is that being neglected both by the media and by religious people?

My personal take on American religion, to overgeneralize, is that a fair number of people think it's *fairly* important and *fairly* interesting. To go back to something Peter said earlier, where is the story? It's not spicy enough. What you have instead is religious people overestimating the influence of religion in American life, and you have, on the other hand, the media downplaying it. I wonder if the feeling among religious people that there's some sort of void is because it's very hard to tell that particular truth. It runs against the grain of one's own interests and also against the spicy dynamics of the American media. Any thoughts on that?

Balmer: To me the story about religion is that it's not settled. Spirituality is very fluid, especially in American culture because of the free market of religion set up by the separation of church and state, by the free exercise clause in the First Amendment. There's a dynamic and a fluidity to it that I find very, very invigorating, very exciting. That fluidity is missed when you emphasize the pronouncements of church denominations or religious bodies.

Steinfels: I'm concerned about there being a false dichotomy there. I think there's good evidence that a lot of people get very worked up about the so-called pronouncements of church bodies, that they take these things very seriously. Otherwise the Presbyterians and the Methodists would not have had huge controversies over reports on human sexuality, and the Lutherans would not have dropped their study on human sexuality basically because of the reaction to the first two paragraphs of David Briggs's Associated Press report on the first draft. From the one side, supporting that draft, some Lutherans said well, Briggs's story emphasized everything that was sensational. The other side, the conservative side, said well, he told the truth in the first two paragraphs and therefore, the word was out. People get worked up about these things. We have some data actually from studies of readership that shows that contrary to a notion that many religious people are primarily interested in local religious news, they are actually quite interested in national and international religious news.

Leo: I don't think there's a shortage of religion coverage in America, but I do think the coverage is of religion as an interest or a hobby in Stephen Carter's terms. All these things about column inches and the Lichter/Rothman study, I couldn't be less interested in. I don't see why anybody should be interested at all. We're not measuring column inches, we're trying to ask: Is religion as a moral force, a permanent moral force in American life, taken seriously by the press? I think the answer to that is no.

Mary Alice Williams said that reporters come from our families and neighborhoods and communities. Well, I disagree. I think they more and more come from the elite colleges. They come from Yale, Harvard, Princeton. When I was at *Time*, Tom Callahan, the sports writer said to me, ever notice everybody here's from Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and Mount Saint Mary's in Baltimore? [laughter] He and I were the non-Ivy contingent at *Time*. I came from no educational background and went to a local paper and climbed up it. My generation's the last of the reporters who entered the trade that way. They come right off the campus now. So you get an elite view of the world and whether you go to journalism school or not, you're getting the campus view. And in this view, religion is okay for the masses, but it's something you leave behind. It's something vaguely childlike and that opinion pervades the press's attitude toward religion. It isn't a conscious conspiracy to hold religion down or to ignore coverage. They'll give the coverage if consumers want it. But they just don't get it, that you can take religion seriously and report it in a critical way. The educated elite that now goes into journalism is not interested in scrambling along reporting the facts. They tend to punditize almost all the time and they view the world through this acquired prism. And that's why religion comes out this way.

Judith Banki: I want to throw a couple of questions into the hopper as well.

The process of interreligious dialogue, in particular Jewish-

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Christian dialogue, has allowed us to see differences as not necessarily threatening to our own group, or at least to sense when they are threatening. We tend to be chary of a quest for religious unity at the expense of genuine differences, particularly when it is imposed from above. "Above" here is a relative term. I mean hierarchical above, not ultimate above.

In addition, those of us who are members of traditional religious minorities are particularly sensitive to the nuances of language, and, I think, quick to spot personal or institutional theological presuppositions hidden in common discourse, particularly in the media. These presuppositions or assumptions are usually not malicious and perhaps not even intentional, but they certainly put a subjective spin on the public understanding of events. I'm going to give one very small concrete example.

Some years ago on the "Today Show" I heard a report from a Midwest reporter on a group called the Gleaners who picked up the leftover, unharvested corn, grains, and vegetables from local farms and distributed it to food centers and soup kitchens for the poor. This reporter said quote, "This practice has its precedent in the Bible. Christ telling the people to leave the edges of their fields unharvested." So I ran to the Bible and checked the Holiness Code in Leviticus and sure enough, I didn't find any reference to Christ [laughter]. It said, "The Lord spoke to Moses and said, when you reap the harvest of your land you shall not reap right into the edges of your field, neither shall you glean the loose ears of your crop. You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the Lord your God." Now I don't mean to express levity about Leviticus but there is a real problem here. A devoted and sincere Christian reporter was reading his understanding of the Bible into the Hebrew Scriptures. In the guise of objective reporting, he was staking out a theological claim. Now when we press for more attention to religion, to taking religion seriously in our media, which is something I certainly opt for myself, how can we avoid and safeguard against this kind of unconscious religious triumphalism?

Reporters and editors are very often described as malicious, venal, and all manner of venial sins, but we scarcely ever accuse them of stupidity, which is usually the cause of their offense.

Mary Alice Williams

That's my first text, and my second text comes from one of my favorite articles and Father O'Hare's favorite magazine of which he was editor. This is an article by Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, before he became president of the NCCB, raising the question of how does an authoritarian church function in a pluralist society. And he says, I'm quoting here, "Nor does a pluralistic society such as ours define that religion or philosophy should have no influence on corporate or individual behavior, but it does determine that such influence in the civic sector is to be exercised through dialogic persuasion in the political process, not through legal compulsion. In order to participate in the social conversation, religion and philosophy must be dressed in the garb of socially relevant discourse and not in the vestments of orthodoxy."

Bob Lynn: I'm a former Lutheran communicator. No one has mentioned the entertainment phenomenon of news coverage these days. The change that seems to be pervasive. The criteria for newsworthiness is the entertainment value of it.

Williams: Yes, the entertainment aspect has increasingly—over the quarter of a century that I've been in television—driven television. If you watch what purports to be news in the context of magazine shows, it is murder and mayhem and precious little else.

I think that these industries are changing dramatically and rapidly. The information superhighway is sending faxes so it's here already. It's not just coming. It will change publishing and broadcasting. We will be increasingly going into niche marketing where there'll be more and more programming devoted to small sectors of the populace. So those who want to see murder, mayhem, and other gee whiz entertainment stuff, will have it, but those like me who can't find time to watch that kind of thing, will have something else to turn to.

Balmer: Earlier this summer I had a phone call from one of the tabloid TV programs, and I forgot what it was frankly, desperate for an interview. I think the issue was Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie. Whatever it was, they sent a crew out to the house and we had to do a quick interview. For the next two weeks, I had phone calls from people throughout the country saying they had seen me on this program, which I didn't see myself actually. But that was about the same time that a documentary that I had done for PBS on Billy Graham came out. I kept expecting these phone calls to be congratulatory telephone calls about the Billy Graham documentary. It turns out nobody's watching Billy Graham. They're watching "A Current Affair" or whatever it was. You can interpret that however you like.

Williams: What do you know about Michael Jackson and Lisa?

Balmer: Nothing [laughter]. Absolutely nothing.

Steinfels: I think there are two questions.

One, can the desire to be entertaining and interesting deform and distort? And the answer is yes, and you've got to be very careful.

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The other is: Have things seriously changed in regard to that? Now there's a debate about whether they've changed at the *New York Times*, which is one of the few papers I suspect that once made it a principle not to be entertaining. But I suspect that there was much interest in entertainment in much of the media and the press all along in American life. So if things are bad, I'm not sure that they have become worse.

I will say that as a writer, if I am working on a...well, let's take a practical example. The conference that was held under the auspices of the World Council of Churches Year of the Woman in which the whole question of Sophia worship was raised. I saw the little flap about this in several denominations and stories on Religion News Service. I didn't cover it. I didn't try. I didn't propose it as a story. But when the controversy in those denominations continued for months and months and months, I said, hey, this is a story I should cover. And at some point, I wrote a story about it.

Now those of you who have followed any of those things know that among the events at the conference were various invocations which were extremely biological if not gynecological in nature. The problem was at what point in the story did you mention these things. They were a legitimate part of the story because they were at the basis of a lot of the outcry that came over the convention. So they were pretty important, but also in danger of sensationalizing the account. Some editors at the *Times* thought that highlighting these invocations was really good—it was entertaining. Others were actually very interested in this whole Sophia notion, which they wanted to use as a peg for getting into the discussion about feminine images of the Godhead and so on. And there was a negotiating process that goes back and forth about this: "Let's move that up to the first paragraph." "No. It doesn't belong there. Put it down in the third paragraph." I think that's the reality. Judgment calls are constantly made. It's wrong to be so Olympian that one would want to think that being interesting and even entertaining isn't an important part of this.

Fleming Rutledge: [*Senior Associate, Grace Church, New York*] I want to make an observation and ask Mr. Leo and Mr. Steinfels if they would comment on it. We are a very young vibrant congregation, and unlike the congregations that were mentioned by Professor Balmer, we really do think theology is important. I think that writers like Anna Quindlen really don't know any theology. Yet, she is perceived as a person who is expert in matters having to do with the Catholic Church. I'm interested in the way in which theologically informed writing can counteract this kind of thing.

Leo: The main question here is, how is reporting informed by knowledge about religion? It's a broad question that enables me to discourse at length. I'm going to return to my prism theme because to me it doesn't make any difference how well-informed you are if you come into a culture that doesn't take these things seriously. I have noticed

that the reporting of Evangelicals in the major newspapers that I read—I read nine a day, including the *Times*—is not serious. In fact, the *Times* had to back down recently, after six articles in a row on how the religious right was this terrible threat to America, they finally had to have one on page one saying Evangelicals are nice, too. Some sort of—we're paying you back, we're saying you're not all villains. And when the Christian Coalition got involved in the Rainbow curriculum debate a couple of years ago here in New York, that was portrayed in the conventional prismatic way of right-wing Catholics, right-wing Robertsonians ganging up to tell New York what to do. The *Daily News*, where my column appears, had three articles in a row saying the same thing—the Christian Coalition descends on New York. So, I did a very uncharacteristic thing for a reporter, I actually phoned a few people. Ralph Reed said that they had seven groups in New York. I called the local organizer. He said they had nine groups in New York. I kept making phone calls and I estimated that maybe fifty Christian Coalition people were in New York. An undetermined proportion were already here in New York, so it didn't look like this tidal wave of outside agitators were telling New Yorkers what to do.

What was never reported, except in Jim Sleeper's column weeks later, is that all minorities voted against the curriculum, the Asians, the blacks, the Hispanics. It was not religious people against the world. It was neighborhoods against Livingston Street [the New York City Board of Education] telling them what they had to teach their kids in the first grade. So, the whole story was all screwed up because the reporting component was missing, and the prism was there to tell you that religion is an obstacle to freedom. That only happens when reporters are attuned by the elite new culture to treat religion as this fumbling little obstacle that we should have gotten over by now.

Steinfels: Yes, I think theologically informed writing could make a big contribution to Americans understanding the culture in which they live and an understanding even of themselves. That was one of the major points of Bellah and company's book, *Habits of the Heart*: that we didn't even have the language to help us live the kind of lives that we seem to be wanting to live. Without the terms to articulate

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our ideals we are having a harder time living up to them.

Now, I'm not sure of the place for that. One of the problems with the *Times*, for example, and this is certainly true of other papers, is this is not just something that needs to appear in a "Beliefs" column or in a religion report on a general meeting of the church body, but in the book section, in the Arts and Leisure section, particularly in culture stories when they bear upon specific religious traditions. We review hardly any serious theological or philosophical books. The daily book review has got *belles lettres*, biographies, political/contemporary affairs, some history. It virtually never reviews a serious book about religion unless some controversy has arisen, when they belatedly decide they have to have a review of it, and it's usually not a first-rate book.

Now, I'd like to take this opportunity to disagree with John. To the extent that the reality that John describes is accurate, the only way in which it will be changed is by a general change in the cultural sectors that produce these journalists. I think that if that's the only way to do it, it does not help to exaggerate the situation. In a certain sense I don't mind the metaphor of culture wars. I do mind the metaphor of culture war: to think that there is a very distinct battle line, and there are two groups firmly placed on either side of it. This is simply not my experience of the newsroom. Every attitude that John has described is an attitude that I have encountered in the newsroom, but I encounter it in all sorts of degrees and mixed in with all sorts of other attitudes. It simply is not as black and white as John describes it. If it is, then the only thing to hope for is that somehow time will replace all these young journalists with successors in forty or fifty years because if they are of one attitude and of such a militant stance, they simply cannot be convinced. I would argue that, in fact, the opinion is much more a range of opinion, and there are a lot of people who are open to real persuasion when one can point out to them the biases under which they are operating.

Williams: I absolutely, wholeheartedly disagree with you, John. It's not been my experience at all. There's an interim step to waiting for this type of journalist to be replaced by the next generation, and that's to open your mouth when you see something happening in a newsroom. I can't think that you don't open your mouth to reporters and editors, as I do, when you see something going in the paper that's just dead wrong. Right?

Leo: Well, yes, you can open your mouth, but here I'm going to be extreme again. It's very hard to get the attention of people who can't hear. They don't get these things. I can give you twenty more stories that were totally screwed up by newspapers. It's a hate war. You should label things for what they are. They don't get through the screen either in commentary or in reporting. People don't get the idea. Again, turning to abortion, why should the *Washington Post*, as we all know, have to apologize for not noticing 500,000 anti-abortion people having a rally four blocks from their office. They didn't notice because nobody in the newsroom had ever met anybody who had any reservations about abortion. This is called a new class. They talk to one another and don't have any idea what's going on in the culture.

Baker: All of this discussion is centered around journalism in the newsroom. But I might point out in the case of television, most of what you see on television has nothing to do with journalism. It's really entertainment programming and other things.The news is only a very small piece of what's on television. I can tell you personally what has happened in both my life in public broadcasting and in commercial broadcasting: Frequently when I would bring up subjects for religious programs or programs with themes of—again, rarely religion, but more broadly philosophy and theology and ethics, I've had very sophisticated mature television programmers tell me, "You know, that's kind of cute. But you really kind of grow out of that, Bill. That's really kind of immature thinking on your part. I used to think that way, but as I've become more sophisticated I realize that that's really not important." I felt I was treated like a child in my bringing up subjects like that. So, I have become in some ways more vehement—at least to wave the flag. I have not necessarily been successful, but I think that it is a real issue.

Leo: So there. □

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Francis J. Maniscalco

What is going on in the media? That is a question everyone is asking today, in the church, in politics, in the media themselves. There is a growing conviction that the media are playing an increasingly negative role in our society. Obviously the strong criticism of violence on television points to one area of concern, largely related to the entertainment media. My area of expertise is with the news media, with print and broadcast journalism; and I will reflect on them.

With regard to the news media, there is a feeling that the media have adopted a cynical attitude which is having a corrosive effect on people's trust in their institutions. Connected with this is the phenomenon sometimes described as the tabloidization of the news, the tendency for the media to fixate on the sensational. Obviously, there were always elements of the media that have done that, the tabloids, for instance, that showcased the sensational, such as bloody crimes and juicy scandals involving celebrities.

But this tendency is escalating and infecting even the serious news organizations. Think of the last couple of years: Amy Fisher and Joey Buttafuoco; Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan; and most recently, O.J. Simpson. These stories clearly were not left to the tabloids. Yet can anyone seriously claim that these matters, as tragic as they are to those immediately involved, have the kind of social significance that warrants the amount of air time and column inches given to them?

Some in the media will suggest that they are in business to make a profit and are simply responding to what the market is demanding. One must reply that the media assume too much, and too quickly decide what the public wants. In fact, they contribute to a lowering of standards by defining as news only what is sensational and by catering, even creating, a short attention span on the part of the public. How quickly the media pass from one subject to another. One day Somalia is in the headlines; a few weeks later people are asking, "Whatever happened to Somalia?" Sometimes a story has truly reached its conclusion; but too often the media have moved on in a restless search for the new, for fear the public will become bored and turn to their competitors.

Part of the role the media have to play—and which they have always had to play—is sifting the news for what is important and what is not. Today they seem to choose more and more in favor of the ephemeral and the sensational. The media seem to be responding to a kind of Gresham's Law by which bad journalism is pushing good journalism out. Or, to put it another way, even those journalists who used to look down on tabloid journalism are now adapting not only tabloid journalism's types of stories but using the tabloids' sensationalistic style to deal with serious stories.

When it comes to covering the church, it sometimes looks to me as if the newspaper publishers and network executives get together somewhere to plot their coverage of church matters. Why do I suspect this? It is because sometimes, when a story takes reporters into unfamiliar territory, they tend to use as a model the work of reporters they think are more knowledgeable. This leads in a few easy steps to what is sometimes referred to as herd journalism or the media talking to themselves.

One story that made many exclaim "What's going on in the media?" was the treatment of the suit filed against Cardinal Joseph Bernardin by Steven Cook. Though this story has finally ended happily with the reconciliation of accuser and the wrongly accused, its earliest stages comprise perhaps the most glaring example of what can go wrong in the media.

Was the filing of the suit legitimate news? I think we have to say yes. Granted that, however, there are different ways to handle it. Let me note two. In the *New York Times*, the story, taking only a few paragraphs, ran well inside the paper. CNN and its reporter Bonnie Anderson, however, acted like the Angel Gabriel announcing the Last Judgment.

Both news organizations were acting on the same set of facts: a young man, about whom little was known, had filed a suit against a prominent person. That's not an uncommon thing. It's not even a difficult thing to do in terms of expending time and money. But filing a suit is not proof; it does not establish that what the young man claimed had actually happened. I think the *Times* hit it about right: it gave the basic facts of the allegation and the cardinal's denial of it and ran the story without fanfare.

"You've just heard what an informed source said. Now, to present the other side, let's hear from an uninformed source."

MSGR. FRANCIS J. MANISCALCO *is director of the Office of Media Relations for the United States Catholic Conference. This is a revised version of a talk given to the New York State Catholic bishops and religious superiors.*

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Bonnie Anderson went on CNN as soon as the suit was filed, dramatically announced that it had been filed moments before, and said it was a suit that could rock the church in this country to its foundations. A few minutes were then devoted to showing Cardinal Bernardin, now put by the media in the position of having to defend himself, denying, in a sidewalk news conference, allegations he so far knew mainly from the news media.

However, for the *pièce de résistance*, after the cardinal's few minutes, CNN ran a six-minute interview with Mr. Cook in which he was not asked the tough questions about his allegations but in which he was pictured in a sympathetic light, almost as if his purpose was, above all, to save the church from itself. With that interview, CNN, in my opinion, moved from reporting a story to intervening in the newsmaking by giving credibility to the accuser. If Mr. Cook seemed believable to the public, it is because CNN seemed to believe him.

Yet this story turned out to be not even a close call. When the facts emerged, as they did within months, the thinness of the suit against the cardinal became apparent and the young man himself dropped it.

There is an additional detail that may show how vulnerable even large and important news organizations like CNN are to manipulation in the current media climate. At a seminar at Northwestern University about the media's treatment of this story, Mr. Cook's lawyer, Steven Rubino, admitted that he had arranged to file the suit just before the annual November meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, just as he had filed another case before the bishops' previous June meeting. He was saying, in effect, that he expected the media to become his unwitting or not-so-unwitting partners in pursuing his case. Since CNN itself had also scheduled a pre-meeting special, an hour-long report with Bonnie Anderson, called "Fall from Grace," about pedophilia among priests, one might have thought CNN's own opportunism would have alerted them to Mr. Rubino's.

I think this story indicates how the media can go wrong: the sensationalism of the treatment; the rush to put the story out to beat possible competitors; the assumption that the alleged victim must be right and the large institution and its leader wrong; and the slipping of journalistic standards by which an allegation, unsupported by corroborating evidence, is enough for a major news organization to broadcast it every hour on the hour with the weakest possible excuse that the accused was also shown denying the charge.

The Bernardin story also highlights an important type of journalism that seems to have gotten out of hand. That is investigative journalism. Many journalists today seem to define all journalism as investigative reporting. This kind of journalism has been in the forefront of the news business at least since the muckrakers at the beginning of this century. Its importance took a quantum leap with Watergate. Soon every reporter wanted to be either Woodward or Bernstein, and no one was successful until he or she had found a scandal to report.

Needless to say, it was the uncovering of real scandals that gave investigative journalism its reputation for serving society; and investigative journalism discovered information that helped cast doubt on the accuracy of the allegation against Cardinal Bernardin. However, investigative journalism is also behind the growing tendency to treat suspicions and allegations as if they were proof of scandalous behavior, and this has made the public as skeptical of the media as the media tend to be of society's leaders.

This is a tremendous irony: The media seem to have conveyed their skepticism—perhaps the word really is cynicism—about contemporary leadership to the public so successfully that the public does not hesitate to apply the same skepticism to the media. This is not simply another example of killing the messenger. It is a developing conviction that the messenger is part of the problem.

Part of traditional media skepticism, and not a bad one in itself, is the media's tendency to take the word of an individual over that of an institution, especially a large one. One of the myths the media live by is the story of David and Goliath: the little fellow who comes out on top over the giant. That's a rousing story indeed. But sometimes the media, in their desire to get that story, actually falsify it or at least drastically oversimplify it. If they looked more carefully, David, in fact, might not turn out to be as right as the media first thought, nor Goliath as wrong. Today the media almost always tend to give credence to even outlandish charges against the church and to those who publicly disagree with church teaching. The media need to think about whether they may be acting like Goliath toward those they think are Goliaths.

Everything I have said up to now could be echoed anywhere from the White House to your local police precinct. Does the church have less generic concerns? I think it does. First it should be pointed out that when it comes to analyzing just how good a job the media do in covering the church or religion in general, it is useful to divide the media in two. Print and electronic media are very different worlds. With regard to religion reporting, print journalism (especially the larger papers in the larger cities) has a tradition of professional religion writers. One may disagree with what they write, but most of these people know a good deal about the subject of religion.

The electronic media—both radio and television—have not had such professionals. Only recently did one TV network, ABC, designate a full-time correspondent to cover religion and values. That says a lot about electronic journalism's attitude toward the importance of religion in society.

Very practically, from the perspective of my job, the difference between talking to a professional religion reporter and to a general reporter is, too often, the difference between night and day. With full-time religion writers, you can get right to the point. With the others, I sometimes feel there's no starting place closer than, "In the beginning God made

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the heavens and the earth." This is not so much a problem of individual reporters as a systemic one. If I were sent to cover a football game, something about which I know next to nothing, the idiocy of my questions would drive everyone I interviewed crazy. No responsible editor would send someone like me to do such a job. Yet many editors and producers of broadcast news seem to feel that almost anyone can report on religion.

The dynamics of television make matters worse. Because of TV's emphasis on personalities, reporters are obliged to become celebrities and are expected to report on everything from space launches to cooking recipes. Is it any surprise, then, that people who know something about religion find TV journalism lacking in depth or overly concentrated on what might be called the sporting aspect of every story: Who won and who lost?

A piece on "Primetime Live" last year, with Sam Donaldson, reported on how the United States purportedly helped Nazis escape Europe at the end of World War II. The story contained allegations about how "the Vatican" helped such Nazis. I couldn't help thinking that Donaldson is about as expert in Vatican refugee policy during the 1940s as I am on football. Clearly somebody brought him a story, and the show's producers had done enough research to find out that a Jesuit historian, Father Robert Graham, was a Catholic expert on the issue. The program gave Graham about a minute of airtime to deny the allegations (enough to claim the show was "balanced"), but then the report blithely continued, using the original assumptions about "Vatican" involvement.

Today, unfortunately, getting a story right often seems to have become less important than getting ratings.

Take another example, the tendentious manner in which "Dateline" handled the story of Father David Trosch, the Alabama priest who espouses killing abortionists. On CNN's "Reliable Sources," "Dateline" correspondent Dennis Murphy described his slant on the story: the church's supposed lack of action against Father Trosch. But that is nonsense. Trosch was disciplined; but, in what seems to me a dangerous mixture of ignorance and arrogance, some in the media decided that no Catholics are really punished unless they are excommunicated. So the media sought to create an issue over "will he or won't he be excommunicated?"

What stands out here is how the assumption that the only good journalism is investigative journalism combined with media skepticism about leadership to distort a straightforward story about Trosch's views and the church's rejection of them. By accepting the fact that there are forms of journalism other than the investigative, forms based on expertise and found in fields as diverse as sports, travel, science, and the arts, such a story might have been informative. This indiscriminate attempt at investigative journalism shows instead how perilously close such efforts can come to making up a story that isn't there.

Nor can we exclude real bias on the part of some in the media. The claim is often made that news people are very secular and are biased against religion because of that. That may be true. However, anti-Catholicism has had a long career in this country, and it is not impossible that some media people retain attitudes ingrained in previous, not very ecumenical eras. One columnist wrote in connection with the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo that "the church has subtle power in addition to its crude sway in some countries." This sounds almost like an echo of nineteenth-century nativist attitudes, with its invocation of some kind of secret Catholic power.

One form this bias may take is overconcentration on the disagreements within the church. Lack of unity within a faith group is certainly newsworthy, whether it comes in the form of the conflict over a document on sexuality in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the leadership debate within the Southern Baptist Convention. Yet pride of place does seem to be given to Catholics who take up pen or microphone to complain about their church. The "Hers" column in the *New York Times* decided to take on the annulment process. I wonder of what other religion's internal processes the *Times* would tolerate such a one-sided description. Purely on journalistic grounds I would take issue with the column's implication that the annulment process is a charade in which annulments are granted willy-nilly, when the annulment entered into evidence seems to demonstrate the opposite. This particular annulment, the writer's former husband's, it turns out, was not granted. Also to make a process that is open to and availed upon almost equally by women and men into a gender issue is more than questionable. I took the column as an application of an unexpressed journalistic principle that there's nothing that cannot be said about the Catholic Church.

One reason, I think, that this principle is so freely applied is that most media see in the Catholic Church only a large institution: the papacy, the hierarchy, the great churches. They don't think it can be stopped or even wounded, even if they wanted to. They almost entirely forget that it is also the religion of ordinary people who can be wounded by how their beliefs are portrayed. Catholics should speak out when they are offended. There are millions of Catholics who are consumers of news, and it is as consumers that we will change news coverage when the news organizations realize that they are offending their own customers.

The media usually point out that criticizing church leadership for its public stands on social issues does not constitute bias. Since there is a kind of common sense to this position, it is important for church members to gather the evidence where bias is suspected. The relentlessness of the criticism, the kind of language used, the willingness or unwillingness to treat the church's position with seriousness, these are indicators of something more than legitimate public debate.

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But addressing all of the above problems is an uphill battle. Few in the media are quick to examine their own behavior and admit to either ignorance or arrogance. Forget about bias. I am reminded that Cardinal Newman once referred to the quasi-infallibility of the periodical publications of his day. Apparently, even before television, the media could display a great lack of humility in reporting on complex topics to which they had only just been introduced.

Religion reporting is too often the clash of two uncomprehending worlds. On one side is a reporter, assigned to a religion story as one among many others to research and write. For the religion story the reporter is not likely to have much of a background in the subject and may even lack a knowledge of basic religious terms. On the other side are religious people, knowledgeable and devoted, but often not having communication with the wider world as either a skill or a priority. Given this scenario, one might be more likely to wonder how there could ever be any satisfactory results rather than that there are so few.

From this scenario, the statement that religious people may not have communications as either a skill or a priority should be taken very seriously.

Religious people also display their own kind of ignorance toward the world of the media and their own form of arrogance toward it. This is too bad, because the two worlds have much in common. The media exist to communicate, to inform, even to shape public opinion, and the church is also about those things. A lot of church people recoil from this idea—perhaps because publicity has gotten such a bad reputation for superficiality, for concentrating on the wrapping instead of the contents—but the gospel is, after all, good "news."

I think it is essential that church leaders be available to news media, sometimes for particular stories and sometimes for general discussions. This will help counteract impressions of remoteness. Reporters, like some other groups, may indeed make more dangerous enemies than reliable friends; but a kind of familiarity, if not friendship, is helpful. If reporters feel they can, on occasion, walk up to a bishop and put a question directly, that goes a long way toward reducing suspicions—on both sides.

We have to make intelligent use of the media by being willing to deal with them. But we also have to do a better job of using our own church communications components. When I edited the *Long Island Catholic*, I once wrote that the church media helped make the church credible in the world of communications, the way our school system makes us credible in the world of education, our hospitals in the world of health care, and Catholic Charities does in the world of social services. A strong communications ministry not only gives the church an independent voice, but it also gives access to the wider world of communications.

Thus, we have a lot going for us. But we also have a lot against us. Even with better communications skills, one problem we have always with us is that, from the media's point of view, a positive story about what the church is doing is not news. "The church is supposed to do good. What's the news there?" The media have a distinct bias for the unusual, the sensational, and for conflict. The stories about the good the church is doing will probably make the grade to the extent that they are unusual (if not sensational). (And if you had to fight the bishop to get something done, all the better!)

I also think we need to put greater emphasis on communications in Catholic education. Media literacy in elementary and high schools, and journalism courses in our Catholic colleges and universities could provide a fine setting for discussing these issues. An extensive network of Catholic schools of journalism could be at the forefront of the field of ethics in communications. It could provide places where secular journalists might turn for courses designed to educate them to cover the Catholic church competently.

Many dioceses, religious communities, and other church organizations have employed directors of communications. A second step needs to be taken: to treat these people's jobs seriously.

The church needs to become more competent in dealing with the mass media. The mass media, in turn, need to become more competent in dealing with news about the church. On both sides this implies personnel development. Church leaders need to employ good, competent communicators to keep the media informed about what the church is doing. Media need to expend their resources to train their people in specialized topics such as religion.

I am convinced that good personnel will create an atmosphere, if not of actual trust, at least of professional regard which may eliminate a significant percentage of the problems. Journalists who display a knowledge and an understanding of religion will be more likely to merit cooperation. In turn, the more journalists see themselves as having access and being kept informed, the less likely they will be to jump to conclusions and claim, as some do, cover-ups typical of a secretive church.

The influence of the media in our society is too great for us to sit on the sidelines, licking our wounds and asking, "What is going on in the media?" It is time to challenge the media to be more responsive, to religious people certainly, but also to the entire community they serve. The more thoughtful in the media are themselves questioning the growing glibness with the way news is selected and treated. A concern for values—which many media people share with their friends and neighbors—can begin to inspire the way they approach the news. If—perhaps that should be "when"—the church enters into a serious and professional dialogue with the media, it may very well be the crucial factor affecting not only the way our own story is told, but also how the means of social communications define the role they should play in our society. □

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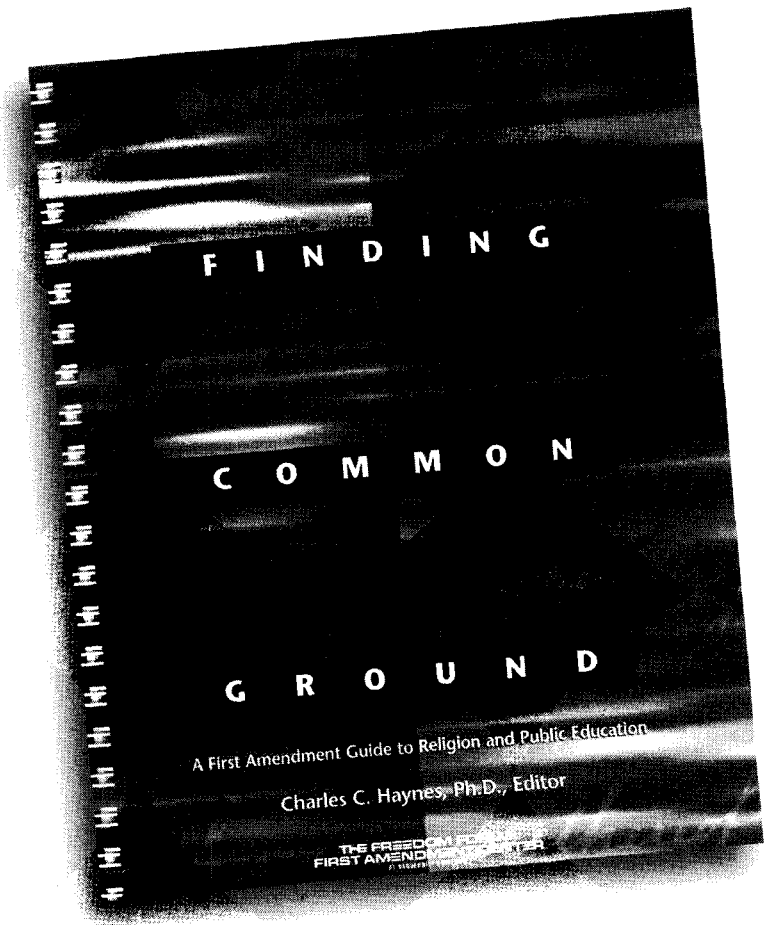

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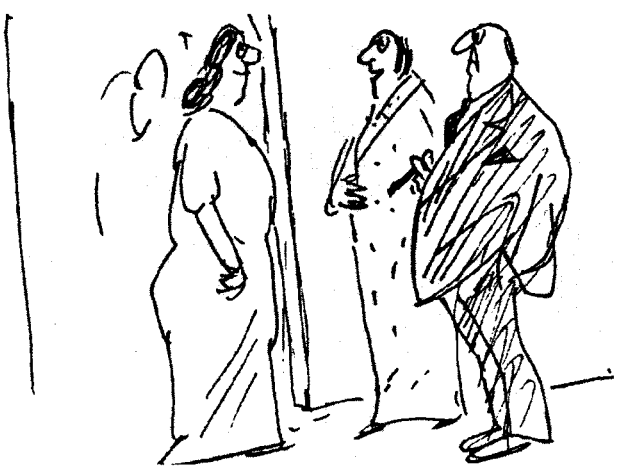
PAUL NEWMAN PERFORMS
HE'S 'NOBODY'S FOOL'

I wonder if Garrison Keillor has seen *Nobody's Fool* and, if so, what he thinks of it. Though it's set in upstate New York rather than Keillor's Minnesota, the film evokes a town very much like Lake Wobegon: small, wintry, so uneventful that little scandals and playful vendettas mark off epochs. And the characters are remarkably like Keillor's: superficially or thoroughly hard-bitten but capable of kindness, stoic, quietly mischievous, aware of the pettiness of their town's life but disdainful of, or oblivious to, the possibilities in the larger world, holding old grudges as dearly as old friendships, sometimes unable to distinguish old grudges from friendships, steered into each other's affairs not so much by nosiness as propinquity.

North Bath is the sort of town where the hero, Donald "Sully" Sullivan, can sue his former boss in the afternoon and then sit down with him in the evening for a game of poker—a game soon to be joined by the plaintiff's lawyer! Sully (Paul Newman), a half-broken-down construction worker and handyman, calls his employer-enemy "Dummy," but the epithet, though always tinged by contempt, is, after years of use, just a nickname that has stuck. "Stuck" is the operative word for North Bath. One is stuck there, and one becomes a stick-in-the-mud by being there; but one also sticks by friends in the best and worst of times, though the best and worst of times may be indistinguishable from each other.

A kind of heroism is possible in this place and Sully possesses it. It's defined by a moment early in the movie. Sully's landlady (Jessica Tandy) is being urged by her banker son to throw her boarder out of the house for being a deadbeat and a furniture-singeing midnight smoker. "Why can everyone see through him, except you?" the son complains. At that very moment, Tandy looks out a window and sees a familiar sight: a senile neighbor is wandering obliviously into the street. Instantly, the landlady summons Sully to rescue the wanderer, though her son is present, able-bodied, and reasonably well-meaning. It is Sully, the official failure, and not her son, the successful moneyman, who has the knack of setting things straight in a jiffy, of fixing, for the nonce, the perennially broken. This is what constitutes heroism in any place like North Bath, for the very day-to-day existence of the town seems improvised. And, by the end of the story, Sully will display much greater heroism: he will merge his life with that of the son he abandoned thirty years ago. He will be more stuck in the wintry muck of North Bath than ever. "We wear the chains we forged in life," Sully's landlady is fond of quoting to her tenant. Sully finally dons those chains with honor.



"This is my husband, Sully. He's nobody's fool."

Just as Garrison Keillor tells his mundane-magical yarns in a lulling, self-effacing manner, director-scriptwriter Robert Benton mounts this Richard Russo story in a seamless fashion. The cutting in the early scenes is quick, as if Benton were balancing the uneventfulness in his material with a fast cinematic pulse, but the tempo slows down as Benton senses that we have been hooked by North Bath's people, by their crotchets, joys, and idiocies. The simple back-and-forth from talking head to talking head (each face lit with gelid beauty by John Bailey) works because we hang on every banal phrase, or rather let ourselves be bobbed along on the currents that move under the banalities.

This movie even has some of Keillor's faults: a certain cutseyness creeps into the telling, and a tendency to wrap up a real mess with a single phone call or one heart-to-heart talk. Also, the abandoned females in this movie—Newman's ex-wife and his son's estranged spouse—verge on caricature, a large fault in any story that seeks to tell us that a return to family is a return to reality.

The supporting cast is excellent. I particularly liked the way Benton turned hitherto irritating traits of some of his actors to good account. Melanie Griffith has annoyed me for a decade with her baby talk and her all-too-winsome smiles, but here all her mannerisms seem absorbed by the character and she really is charming. Though Bruce Willis has more versatility than critics have acknowledged, he also has a tendency to smugness. Here he uses that very quality to limn the fatuousness of Carl Roebuck, Sully's indispensable enemy. The late Jessica Tandy, who never irritated me, is radiant as the landlady.

But the movie must finally stand or fall on Paul Newman's performance. It stands. In being both utterly unostentatious yet riveting in its tiny unpredictabilities, Newman's creation both animates and epitomizes the film, yet somehow transcends it. The actor fully supports and "feeds" his fellow players but makes Sully a resident of a different universe, a world compounded of memories, dreams, and regrets that the other characters cannot see. Sully is a profane and sometimes vulgar man, but whenever a thought takes hold of him, Newman's face becomes luminescent. Paul Newman, the sexy wise guy of the fifties and sixties, has become the most incorporeal of actors, the great gray ghost of the silver screen.

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When I went to John Singleton's feature debut, *Boyz 'n the Hood*, I was expecting sociology, but what I got was a work of art. *Higher Learning*, his new movie about sexual and racial tensions on campus, is not only sociology, but the most naive, flat-footed sort imaginable. It's a work of good intentions, and these intentions seem to have leached every last ounce of originality out of Singleton and much of his intelligence of well. I can't think of any recent film that extolled so highly the benefits of knowledge and yet displayed such ignorance in every frame, every line of dialogue, and each turn of an utterly mechanical plot—ignorance of the academic scene, ignorance of what makes a drama compelling, ignorance of life itself. The only sign left of the Singleton who made *Boyz* is in this movie's propulsion: he's still enough of a filmmaker to keep our eyes on the screen, but that won't stop any viewer who's lived a little from wincing at the callowness he sees there.

Just consider the campus that Singleton presents us with: it's just a hunk of ground on which the director got permission to shoot. There's no *there* there. For all I know, the campus mall may be a real mall but, judging from what we see on screen, he could have used a stage set. The office of the professor played by Lawrence Fishburne doesn't look like a teacher's office but an admissions department. When one student, trying to study, is driven out of his dorm room by the blasting stereo of his roommate, he never thinks of going to the student union building. But how could he, since Singleton doesn't give this campus a student union, though such a building is usually the center of campus life? And that rally that opens this movie—what's going on there? A political protest? A pregame bacchanal? A welcome party for freshmen? I saw cheerleaders twirling, but Singleton shoots the scene as if it were Hitler's Nuremberg party congress as captured by Leni Riefenstahl in *Triumph of the Will*.

That brings up another problem. Singleton has been looking at too many movies lately. Directors often sharpen their visions of what their projects should look like by screening whatever classic has inspired them for their collaborators. Scorsese showed his colleagues Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* before beginning *Taxi Driver*, and *The Heiress* was the model for *The Age of Innocence*. But Singleton hasn't absorbed the classics from which he's trying to draw sustenance. Not only is Riefenstahl an undigested influence but so are Coppola and David Lean. A skinhead making nefarious plans is given the crescent moon lighting that Brando received in *Apocalypse Now*. But Brando's Kurtz was meant to be as mysterious as the moon, while the skinhead is an obvious thug with no evil resonance whatsoever. He should have been blasted with harsh light, not bathed in artsy-fartsy shadows. When the heroine slowly weaves to a microphone at a feminist rally (lots of rallies in this movie) to declare herself a rape victim, the camera's slow track forward representing her point-of-view is a steal from *Passage to India*: Miss Quested's reeling progress to the witness stand to testify about her alleged rape. But note that *Passage*'s director, David Lean, in a stroke of genius, put in a seemingly irrelevant detail: Miss Quested fastens her gaze for one moment on an onlooker's shoe. That numbly noticed, inconsequential shoe perfectly conveys the young woman's fearful state. Singleton's tracking shot, by contrast, is just a film-school tactic, mechanically executed and devoid of surprise.

And the acting! In the male lead, Omar Epps, though not particularly memorable, has vigor and snap, but all the other young players are just so many blobs. Worse, Lawrence Fishburne, one of the best American actors alive, has saddled himself with an accent meant to convey that his character is third-world born but Oxbridge-educated. So Fishburne gets to pronounce "peppermint" as "pepper mènt." Pass the watercress and sandwiches.

And how do people convey intelligence in this movie titled *Higher Learning*?

HERO: Who do I have to prove myself to?

HEROINE: Yourself.

...HERO: I want power!

PROFESSOR FISHBURNE: Information is power!

This movie is turning a profit at the box office, so John Singleton will work again. But he's in bad trouble anyway—the worst sort of trouble an artist can have. He doesn't know who he is.

RICHARD ALLEVA

Lee Oser

Mosaic Days

Pieces of mosaic,
the days lie scattered on the table,
sparkling in their dust.
You arrange them with gladiolas
or bowls of silver rain
and the wind flutters round
like a voiceless bird.

The days may hasten to Jerusalem,
or to a wife, a city herself
speaking a language you hardly understand,
or to a friend who passed away
or to a kind of paradise.
Quietly, through doors and locks,
they return at night to you.

And so you disappear and reappear
stepping through streets like so many photographs
like aerial shots from different eras.
At intervals a pink light
is on everything, or a shadow
stretches endless fingers
touching you like the sun.

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'Usu. considered vulgar'

RANDOM HOUSE HISTORICAL DICTIONARY OF AMERICAN SLANG
Volume I, A–G
J. E. Lighter, Editor
Random House, $50, 1,006 pp.

Nicholas R. Clifford

Was Mr. Gingrich being catty when he called Mrs. Clinton bitchy? Unfortunately "catty" does not appear in the *Historical Dictionary*, presumably because it is now considered standard English, but "bitchy" does. The editor suggests that it applies only to women or to homosexual men, thus leaving me in the dark as to whether a man can be catty. A Democrat, in any case, might be forgiven for thinking the Newt was behaving like a bastard when he said it, even though that word, "long considered to be one of the strongest abusive terms in English [now] has lost some its force to more overtly sexual insults."

And J. E. Lighter's massive labor of love is, not surprisingly, particularly rich in both sexual terms and insults. Covering only the first seven letters of the alphabet, it nonetheless runs to over a thousand pages of text (a dozen of which, in case you're wondering, are devoted to the f-word in its various forms and compounds). During its preparation Lighter must have been genuinely grateful for the computer's ability to produce macros, for the phrase "usu. considered vulgar" appears on page after page like a Californian mantra. Not surprising, perhaps, if you agree with him (and with Stuart Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang*) that most slang, particularly in its taboo and derogatory aspects, reflects male usage and male interests (though Lighter points out that today, particularly among college women, the generalization may be breaking down).

It's not usually a good idea to read reviews of books you've been asked to evaluate, but I did sneak a look at a piece in the *New York Review of Books* some months ago, whose author sees the *Historical Dictionary* as a compendium of words whose more common use will be liberating for all of us. Despite Lighter's warning, the (male) reviewer seems to fall for the romanticized view of slang as a more genuine form of communication and description than standard English. He does it by confining his attention almost entirely to the sexual terms, cautiously avoiding the more heavily mined terrain of what Lighter calls slang's "stupidly coarse and provocative" side, particularly in its development of a vocabulary of contempt for people of different classes and groups. His is not a new view; "correct English," Lighter quotes a character in *Middlemarch* as saying, "is the slang of prigs who write history and essays."

Lighter's enormously rich book doesn't just cover current slang, either. For this is a historical dictionary, and we can learn about badger workers and barnburners, Cape Ann turkeys, and calibogus. We discover that in 1856 students balled up their exams when they failed them at Middlebury, were feezed when they pledged to join a secret society at the University of Vermont, and bleached when they preferred to be spiritually rather than bodily present at Harvard's morning prayers. We learn that "boondock" comes from a Tagalog word meaning "mountain," that "cumshaw" is a corruption of Amoy dialect *kam-sia* (*ganxie* in standard Chinese), meaning "grateful thanks," and we learn that a "gook" was originally a prostitute.

Two world wars, the spread of black English, and the British invasion of the sixties have enormously enriched the American vocabulary, even though political correctness may be diminishing it more recently; here, though "girl" appears as meaning "man" in various forms, Lighter prefers "young woman" when he has to define words like babe, bimbo, bird, biscuit, buffarilla, chick, chippy, cooky, doll, dolly bird, or filly (a few of these apply to both sexes, and a few are "sometimes considered offensive"). Occasionally he demolishes hoary myths. It's upsetting to learn there's no connection between "crap" and the name of the English sanitary engineer Thomas Crapper (1837-1910), who helped develop the flush toilet. You want proof? Check out J.P. Maher's article "Out of the Closet" (giving a new meaning to that particular phrase), published in 1985. And when he defines "ambulance-chaser" as "a

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lawyer or lawyer's agent who obtains clients by inciting accident victims to sue for damages, or through similar unethical practices," Lighter betrays a touching nostalgia for a kinder, gentler day in the legal world.

The lucid introduction explains the principles of inclusion and exclusion, distinguishing slang from other forms of nonstandard English, such as cant and jargon, and simply informal use. Still, one notices the absence of certain words. Why, for instance, no "awesome" (as in "totally awesome") though "enormous," which meant the same thing in the nineteenth century, is here? Why no "channel surfing," though "change the channel" makes it? "Bork" is here as a verb, but Rush Limbaugh's "feminazi" isn't (one can only speculate, by the time Volume II appears, how many species of "newt" will have emerged).

Of course there are enormous numbers of racial and religious words, most of them insulting: frogs of various sorts, dagoes, ginzos, guineas, bagel-benders, fishbellies, and fishheads. Though not a bamboo American (i.e., gone Asiatic), I study Chinese history, and after reading through the "Chinese" headings (fire drill, landing, gangway, home-run) I turned to "American," and found nothing. So let me add "American girl": at the turn of the century it denoted a Western prostitute working the seaports of the China coast. Finally, readers of this journal may wish to know that Roman Catholics have been referred to as cat-lickers, fish-eaters, dogans, or chest-pounders. (I'll confess that my wife had to explain that last term to me, *mea culpa*. But then she's a Cliffie, a term still used, though "Cantab" has fallen out of fashion for students at the nearby boys' school.) And while there's no reference to "*Commonweal* Catholic," one wonders if some Latin expletive (usu. considered vulgar) doesn't echo like a chant through the cloisters of the Holy Office.

Now, a thoroughly self-interested appeal: would readers please deluge *Commonweal*'s book editor with letters telling him that since he sent me Volume I, he must send me Volumes II and III as well? Much as I believe in sharing the wealth of Lighter's splendid work, my library won't be complete without the entire set. □

YOSSARIAN GOES UNDERGROUND

CLOSING TIME
Joseph Heller
Simon & Schuster, $24, 464 pp.

Daniel M. Murtaugh

In Joseph Heller's two best novels, *Catch 22* and *Something Happened*, the narrative circles obsessively around a repressed memory that it is the stories' business finally to confront. We feel the tremors of its eventual eruption in each book even as the narrator frantically distracts us with slapstick improvisation. In his newest novel, *Closing Time*, Heller brings back the (anti-) hero of *Catch 22*, John Yossarian, and once again something horrific is building beneath his life and those of his generation and their century as they all draw to a close.

But this time it is not a brute fact lodged in memory, the something that draws its power simply from having happened. It is instead something that is going to happen—we're going to die—and it draws its power from—well—how we feel about that. The problem is that we may not all feel the same way about our approaching death, as we cannot fail to do about Howie Snowden bleeding to death on the floor of the bomber in *Catch 22*. We cannot really imagine our death. On the other hand, try as we might, we cannot help imagining Snowden. It comes down to a question of authority, the authority of an author's claim on our imagination. There is less of it in *Closing Time*.

It reaches for such authority by reading into the passing of the World War II generation a paranoid apocalypse in the manner of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. Yossarian's life goes into and out of a kind of virtual reality involving a Dantesque underworld entered through the false back of a basement tool locker in the New York Port Authority Bus Terminal. Beneath this underworld runs an underground railroad meant to provide indefinite protection for the elite of the military/industrial/political complex chosen by triage to survive the coming nuclear holocaust. As catalyst for that holocaust we are given a mentally challenged president known to us only by his affectionate nickname, the Little Prick, who is enthralled by the video games that fill a room just off the Oval Office, especially the game called Triage which enables him eventually to trip the wire on the conclusive Big Bang.

Heller's underworld has some fetching attributes. It is managed by George C. Tilyou, the Coney Island entrepreneur who ran the Steeplechase amusement park before World War I. Tilyou died before any of the novel's protagonists was born, but the remembered stories about him and

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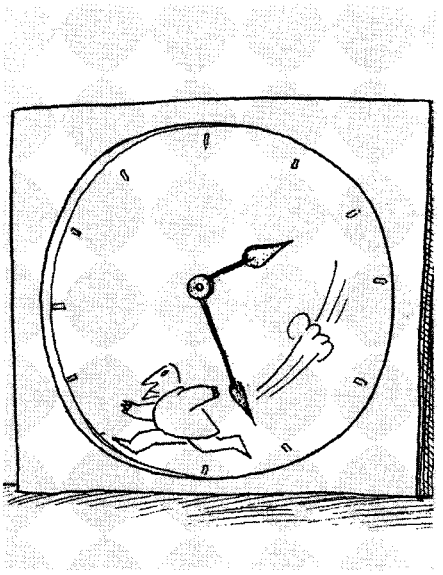

his slowly sinking house with the family name on the front step qualify him as a jolly major domo of hell, a man whose love for his fellows sincerely expressed itself in fleecing them. Now, below the sub-sub-basement of the bus terminal, he rejoices in having taken it with him, for his house and eventually his whole amusement park sank down around him. Rockefeller and Morgan come by and panhandle miserably for his wealth, having learned too late that their more conventional philanthropy could not sanctify their plunder or secure their grasp on it.

Other aspects of Heller's grand scheme are less successful. Two characters from *Catch 22*, Milo Minderbinder and ex-Pfc. Wintergreen, are strawmen representatives of the military-industrial complex, peddling a nonexistent clone of the Stealth bomber to a succession of big-brass boobies with names like Colonel Pickering and Major Bowes. Much of this is the sort of thing that killed vaudeville and is now killing "Saturday Night Live."

Against these gathering forces of death, Yossarian asserts his allegiance to life in a way that is by now a reflex of the Norman Mailer generation: he has an affair with and impregnates a younger woman, a nurse whom he meets in a hospitalization of doubtful purpose at the opening of the novel. Thank heavens, I thought as I read, that I belong to the only sex capable of such late and surprising assertions. But, as the euphoria ebbed, I had to admit that Yossarian's amatory exertions were more than faintly repulsive.

So the novel is disappointing where it hurts the most, in its central organizing idea. Why, after all, does Yossarian's generation get to take the whole world down with it? Well, it doesn't, really, and yet the veterans of World War II do have a special claim on us as they pass from our sight. This claim is more convincingly urged by the long first-person narratives of two characters who, we learn, moved invisibly on the periphery of events in *Catch-22*.

Lew Rabinowitz and Sammy Singer are non-neurotics whose stories reveal their limitations and, at the same time, allow us to see around and beyond them. This is harder to do with normal people, and Heller brings it off beautifully. Rabinowitz is an aggressive giant, the son of a Coney Island junk dealer, an instinctively successful businessman who lacked the patience for the college education offered him by the G.I. Bill, and who never comprehended as we do his own delicacy of feeling. Singer, a writer of promotional and ad copy for *Time*, is, by his own account, a bit of a pedant given to correcting Rabinowitz's grammar. Heller sometimes allows Singer's prose style to stiffen in a way that is entirely in character and that gives an unexpected dignity and pathos to passages like those that describe his wife's last illness.

Rabinowitz and Singer basically get more respect from their author than Yossarian and the characters who figure in his story. The two new characters tell us stories embued with an unforced humor and with the sort of gravity that attends good people as they come to terms with their mortality. And this goes for their wives as well, for both men make good and entirely credible marriages that last a lifetime. Yossarian should have been so lucky. □

REVIEWERS

NICHOLAS R. CLIFFORD *retired from Middlebury College in 1993, where he was provost and taught East Asian history. He recently published a first novel,* The House of Memory.

DANIEL M. MURTAUGH *works in the Treasurer's Division of W.R. Grace & Co. in Boca Raton, Florida.*

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 2)

death, or that the Jews of today need to be "forgiven" for anything having to do with the death of Christ.

Mysteries or myths?

Jersey City, N.J.

To the Editors: Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's article on "Dissent and Communion" in your 70th anniversary issue [November 18, 1994] prompted me to compare her thinking with my own, expressed in an unpublished essay.

What struck me most of all was the different focal point on the same topic. Ms. Steinfels focused on communion and its conditions; I on the magisterium, the claim to a divinely protected teaching authority. She looked mainly at the flesh and blood; I looked mainly at the skeletal support. In tone, her piece was warmer; mine, colder, even acerbic. She is clearly more knowledgeable about church teaching since Vatican II; I drifted away shortly after that and have not kept up with the latest twists and turns.

Finally, Ms. Steinfels mainly analyzed "orthopraxy" where I mainly probed "orthodoxy." The distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy was quite insightful and valuable. If I remember the Gospel description of the Last Judgment, God will judge us not by whether we are Arians or Hindus or the most papal of Catholics; he will judge us by whether we fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty. In the final analysis, orthopraxy is the more important matter.

Notwithstanding, doctrine is important. Ms. Steinfels seems to dismiss the magisterial "paraphernalia" because they matter little to the laity. But that does not mean they should not matter. It appears that many of the laity today simply reject the teaching authority of the church on matters that affect their daily lives. Some who reject that authority leave the Catholic church, deeming it an unreliable guide to religious and moral truth. Some others remain, but settle for warm fuzzies on Sunday morning. To be sure, still others, like Ms.

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Steinfels, admit of doctrinal boundaries, but (at least, in this article) without probing the nature, validity, and scope of the church's claim to be a divinely founded and guided instrument for teaching essential religious and moral truths.

What does it mean to say that the church is "intrinsically bound up with God and revelation"? That the "Petrine ministry" is "a constitutive principle of each particular church"? Mere words, it seems. It is insufficient to say that we must rally round the Eucharist. The notion of the Eucharist is itself a dogma, taught and either accepted as reliable truth or rejected. Ecclesial communion and the norms of orthodoxy are likewise doctrines, taught and either accepted or rejected.

Ms. Steinfels assumes communion. I wonder about it. *Casti connubii*, precursor of *Humanae vitae*, is a termite that has eaten through to the very foundations of the church, in my mind. If they are so certain and so wrong on contraception, what else are they wrong on? I do not know now whether the church teaches mysteries or myths. Like Paul Elie in the same issue, I stand with "My Patron, Thomas the Doubter."

Despite my critique, "Dissent and Communion" was most thoughtful, stimulating, and far more learned than my own essay. Thanks for publishing it.

JOHN F. BOYNE

The author clarifies: I do not dismiss the magisterium or magisterial paraphernalia; I regret that a quick move from one point to the next made it *seem* so.

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS

The quest for Jesus

Washington, D.C.

To the Editors: Many thanks for providing so much space for Professor Luke Timothy Johnson's review-essay of volume 2 of my study, *A Marginal Jew* ["Telling the Gospel Story," November 18, 1994]. I owe thanks also to Professor Johnson for his effort and good will, for offering a clear précis of the volume, and for venturing some methodological and hermeneutical reflections on it.

These reflections naturally invite a response; just as Professor Johnson disagreed with me on a number of points, I would question some of his observations. I will take up six points, roughly in the order in which they are treated in the review:

1. Professor Johnson objects to my linking Jesus' healings and exorcisms with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. In his view, this is an illegitimate linking of two different aspects of Jesus' ministry; both aspects may indeed be historical, but the two are linked only by my false inference.

I am puzzled by this objection, since Jesus himself links his exorcisms with the coming of the kingdom in Matt. 12:28/Luke 11:20, and similar sayings occur in Mark 3:24-27. Moreover, in Matt. 11:2-6/Luke 7:18-23 Jesus implies that his various miracles are the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies about the end-time. Now, one may dispute that these sayings come from the historical Jesus, though I argue at some length for their authenticity. The point, however, is that, as the Gospel texts stand, it is Jesus, not Meier, who makes the connection between miracles and kingdom (or, alternately, the end-time that fulfills prophecy). If one wants to reject the link, one must argue against the authenticity of the say-

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ings in the mouth of Jesus—something Johnson does not do.

2. If I read him correctly, Johnson does not accept the criterion of coherence as a warrant for any judgments about the historicity of material in the Gospels. I readily admit (as I did in volume 1 of *A Marginal Jew*) that coherence is not as strong a criterion as multiple attestation or discontinuity. That is why I try as much as possible not to decide the historicity of a particular deed or saying of Jesus by coherence alone; as much as possible, I try to combine it with some other argument. Yet almost all "questers" accept and use coherence as one of the major criteria of the quest, and with good reason. Along with them, and contrary to Johnson, I do not think that coherence can be so quickly dismissed as indicating only that something is "possible."

3. Connected with Johnson's difficulty with the criterion of coherence is his difficulty with drawing "inferences" about the historical Jesus. Again, I am puzzled as to whether Johnson rejects any and all inferences drawn by questers for the historical Jesus or simply the ones he lists. Works on the methodology of history, such as C. Behan McCullagh's *Justifying Historical Descriptions*, see inference as a basic mode of arguing about historical questions. If we were to do away entirely with arguing by way of inference, a notable part of ancient history, especially the history of ancient philosophy and religion, would disappear. Inference is not automatically "false inference"; one must decide each case on its merits.

4. One example of this point is Johnson's objection to my inference that "nourished as he was on the Scriptures of Israel, Jesus was quite aware that God as creator had always been king." To me it is inconceivable that a deeply religious first-century Palestinian Jew, cognizant of Israel's sacred writings, especially Isaiah and the Psalms, would not be aware of such a central truth. Given the religious traditions of Israel and the fierce religious engagement of Jesus, the burden of proof must lie with anyone who would deny my proposition.

5. Still more puzzling is Johnson's final paragraph, where he affirms that "we shall find that the 'historical Jesus' is just where he was all the time: in the fourfold testimony and interpretation of the Gospel narratives." That the four Gospels constitute the main source for reconstructing the historical Jesus is a truism for almost everyone. But Johnson seems to mean something more here, and seems to be using "the historical Jesus" in a very unusual sense that I find difficult to comprehend.

Concretely: It is clear that the Synoptic Jesus cleanses the temple at the end of his public ministry. That the Johannine Jesus cleanses the temple at the beginning of his public ministry is clear. That the historical Jesus actually cleansed the temple toward the end of his public ministry is the consensus of questers using the criteria of historicity. But when does the historical Jesus who is present "in the fourfold testimony and interpretation of the Gospel narratives" cleanse the temple?

Another example: The Marcan Jesus does not know all things—including the date of the parousia. The Johannine Jesus does know all things. The historical Jesus constructed by most questers would basically jibe on this point with the Marcan Jesus. What or how much does the historical Jesus who is present in the fourfold testimony of the Gospels know? I am at a loss to know who or what "the historical Jesus" championed by Johnson is—a harmonization of the four Gospels, a selection from among them, or something else?

6. Most puzzling is Johnson's final affirmation that "what is essential to a person is not...the facts of what was said and done...but rather the meaning of those facts for those whose experience and memory of the person was also part of their historical reality...." Two things are troubling here: first, the implied dichotomy betweeen facts and their meaning, and second, the affirmation that what is essential to the person is not the facts of what he or she did or said. More to the point: The words and deeds of Jesus did not first assume meaning when they were remembered, reinterpreted, and in some cases created out of whole cloth by the early church. The Jew Jesus of Nazareth had meaning—for some Jews tremendous meaning, positive or negative—during his public ministry, circa A.D. 28-30. It was this meaning which—at least in part—unleashed as well as explained his execution, the ongoing impact of his life in the years immediately after his death, and the subsequent reinterpretations of his life by the early church in the following decades of the first century.

By now it may appear that I am displeased by Johnson's review-essay. On the contrary, I am delighted that, in true scholarly fashion, he took the occasion to raise some basic questions of method and thus invite dialogue on the subject. This letter has tried to contribute to the dialogue; obviously, it does not speak the last word.

(REV.) JOHN P. MEIER

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The reviewer replies:

I will begin this comment on John Meier's courteous response to my review of his book by reaffirming the main point of the review, which was that he was doing about as good a job as possible with the task as it has been defined. My difficulties have to do much more with the definition of the task. Unfortunately, debates over epistemology and logic (as in distinguishing what's possible from what's

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probable in historiography) are great fun for the debaters—especially if they are drinking beer and yelling—but tend to give everyone else a headache. So I will keep this brief.

By no means do I reject the notion that inference and something like a criterion of coherence are valuable and necessary in historiography. The problem is working with them without adequate controls. When one begins by discarding the Gospel narrative framework, and sets about testing each piece in isolation, then the invocation of coherence and the drawing of inferences get tricky. I continue to think that Meier, like many other historical-Jesus researchers, continues to use the narrative of the Gospels as an implicit and unacknowledged frame of reference.

Take the example he cites, of linking exorcisms and the kingdom of God. Meier is quite correct that the passages he cites place this linkage in the mouth of Jesus. I simply question whether we can move on that basis to broader statements concerning the historical character of Jesus' ministry, and above all his understanding of that ministry. The reason is simple: What the method yields is what is historically verifiable, but it does not establish all that happened, or what was most important in what happened. And no matter how many pieces are accumulated, they cannot by themselves yield a meaningful pattern.

Take also the line quoted by Meier concerning Jesus being "quite aware that God as creator had always been king." As I point out in my review, it is impossible to infer from an isolated statement by anyone that person's state of mind or "awareness." Meaning requires context. In order to make his inference, Meier must implicitly invoke the portrait of Jesus given by the Gospel narratives. Where else could we find his "fierce religious engagement" except in the interpretation given Jesus by the Gospels? Is not even the statement, "if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," compatible with religious charlatanism? Of course it is. We conclude that charlatanism is unthinkable for Jesus on the basis of the entire character of Jesus as "fiercely religious" and compassionate and genuine that is given by the Gospel narratives...and only there.

Finally, what I mean by the historical Jesus being the Jesus of the Gospels is that the character of Jesus is available historically only in these narratives (and, I would argue, also in the narrative fragments of other New Testament writings). It is the Jesus who was radically obedient to God and selfless in giving to others that is inscribed in these narratives. Meier is right: This is Jesus as perceived by the only ones who bothered to remember him. When we try to bypass the shape of that memory, all we have are pieces that can be shuffled at random. I applaud the careful shuffling of Father Meier, but I think that the Jesus of the Gospels still guides his hand. Thank God.

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

From the cutting edge

West Hartford, Conn.

To the Editors: Let me use the occasion of joining the Commonweal Associates to explain why I enjoy *Commonweal*. I am a twenty-five-year-old believing Catholic who never went to Catholic schools (except for the seventh grade; didn't leave much of an impression) and never has taken a course in religion. In college, I developed a craving for an adult faith and tried to satisfy it, partly by subscribing to a number of periodicals. Now I have let most of these subscriptions lapse; *Commonweal* is the only one I will continue to renew.

The reason is that of all these magazines, only *Commonweal*'s voice, and particularly the voice of Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, was crying out to the rest of the church, Rodney-King style, "Can't we all just get along?" I found the polarization within the church shocking, and many of the publications I tried were contributing to it. But not *Commonweal*; rather than adding to the tension you helped to defuse it—for example, by the amusing editorial on the fictional encyclical defending Notre Dame's right to be "Numero Uno" in football [January 28, 1994], and Margaret O'Brien Steinfels's essay, "Dissent and Communion" [November 18, 1994], and her articles on similar themes in *America* and *U.S. Catholic*. These essays demonstrated a desire to be open-minded and objective that I rarely saw from other writers grappling with the same issues. *Commonweal* challenges the church in ways that it should be challenged, but always from a position of respect. I also appreciate your willingness to challenge the other challengers; I loved it when you went toe-to-toe with Catholics for a Free Choice.

A final point. In a recent issue of *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus suggested that *Commonweal* has an "aging readership." I'm not sure how true that is, but the three people I've sent gift subscriptions to—an actuary, a journalist, and a fellow-student at the University of Connecticut law school—are all in their twenties. I'd like to think we're on the cutting edge.

PETER J. WOLFGANG

From the editors: To Peter J. Wolfgang, multiple thanks. To Richard John Neuhaus, an ever-so-gentle reminder: *First Things* also has an aging readership (and editor). So does *Highlights for Children*.

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The way we really were

A. W. GODFREY

Not long ago, I got a phone call from someone whose voice I had not heard for twenty-five years. We had sung together as boy sopranos with the Paulist Choristers, then a well-known choir which appeared regularly on radio and in concerts. The choir had been an oddly bonding experience, quite unlike Little League or other organized activities that now occupy young people. The cohesion was church music, most of which was in Latin. But there were also the Victorian and sentimental hymns whose words and images still echo in my ears after many decades.

The choristers sang in the Church of Saint Paul the Apostle, a large cavernous building where the voices and organ echoed ethereally and hypnotically and attracted worshipers from all over New York City. Until the building of Lincoln Center, the parish was in a gritty Irish and Italian neighborhood contiguous to Hell's Kitchen.

The music and mentoring by the directors and adults of the choir helped many of the boys to enter Catholic high school, get part-time jobs, and stay out of trouble until they could attend college. Many siblings of choristers did time in jail, became alcoholics, or worked in dead-end civil service jobs, eking out their lives in quiet desperation.

During the Depression, the Irish had little economic power, excluded as they were from the Protestant establishment. During this time, many fathers lost their jobs, and families barely subsisted on home relief. The lucky ones worked for the city or state, with regular paychecks and some job security. They lived in cold-water flats with a single toilet on the hall and a weekly kitchen bath in a bathtub that also served as the kitchen table with a board or enamel metal covering.

Parents were all distant figures who did not interact much with the young friends of their children. We were told what happened to others' families was none of our business. Yet as we got older, we realized that not all families are alike, and "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." I know now that the parish was the constant, and nearly the only cohesive element in the lives of many Irish families. The pastor often gave money to the wife to put food on the table, or urged the landlord to have patience with late payments of rent, and even paid the rent if there was no income. The children who went to the parish school were subsidized or given financial help to go to Catholic high schools where the successful students went on to make the American Dream a reality.

The father was often a feared or embarrassing figure because he suffered from low status and income. His work was rarely satisfying, and on payday he often ended up at the local saloon. Often, the frustrated father returned home on Friday drunk and guilty, to abuse his wife and children physically and verbally. Frequently, the wife, the strength and stability of the family, would meet her husband at work to escort him home before he spent his money on drink.

In spite of the damage it has done to Irish families, the mystic joys of alcohol continue to be celebrated in literature and it remains very much part of the Irish literary tradition—with its undercurrent of great sadness, futility, and despair. Even to this day, scarred survivors remember their mother saying "Go down to Malloy's (or Murphy's) and get your father."

The cycles of drinking, physical violence, and abuse were rarely discussed unless they became too public to deny. Denial, in fact, was part of the Irish way of life. Anything personal or negative about family was met by silence. Until recently, alcoholism and mental illness were considered moral weaknesses rather than diseases and caused unspeakable shame. The failure to seek help for either has crippled families for generations.

Poverty, prejudice, frustration, and a sense of helplessness fueled by alcohol were the demons that cursed many an Irish family in the pre- and post-World War II generations. All seemed to change in 1960 with the election of John F. Kennedy. With that single event, the Irish felt absorbed into the great America that had excluded them for at least a hundred years. They have also forgotten their past and have romanticized the "good old days" that never were. Somehow, the ugliness has faded to the point that in people's minds it may never have happened.

And yet in the last twenty years, the middle-class Irish who have made it are increasingly worried about drugs and crime among the poor and people of color. They see no connection between their own struggle and that of African-Americans and Latinos. They should realize that drug use is often caused by the same poverty, frustration, and failure and, like alcohol, it helps the victim forget, while it also destroys families and relationships. Only recently have we acknowledged that alcohol is a drug and addictive, but it is socially acceptable and portrayed by the media as sophisticated. Yet our terrified reaction to drugs and crime is repression and incarceration rather than such long-term solutions as quality education. We refuse to see the parallels with our own past because we are basically prejudiced (or racist) and prefer not to visualize how we were formally perceived by those in power. It is far more comforting to criticize those whom we can assign to an inferior status and feel nostalgically superior about our own antecedents. □

A. W. Godfrey is a lecturer in classics at SUNY Stony Brook.

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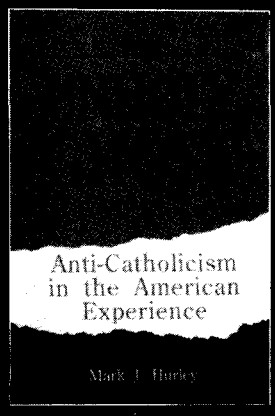

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